

Pope Francis leads bishops in abuse crisis examination of conscience

Pope Francis Saturday led the presidents of the world's bishops' conferences in a penitential liturgy and examination of conscience on their failures in handling abuse within the Catholic Church.

"For three days we have spoken to each other and listened to voices of victim survivors about the crimes that children and young people have suffered in our Church," the pope said to bishops Feb. 23.

"We have asked each other: how can we act responsibly and what steps do we now need to take? But so that we can go into the future with new courage, we must say, like the prodigal son: 'Father, I have sinned.'"

Francis spoke during a penitential liturgy held inside the apostolic palace of the Vatican on the third day of a global summit on sexual abuse and child protection, held Feb. 21-24.

In attendance at the summit and penitential liturgy were, from around the world, about 190 heads of bishops' conferences, Eastern Catholic Churches, and religious communities, as well as several members of the Roman Curia.

"We need to examine," the pope stated during the liturgy, "where concrete actions are needed for the local Churches, for the members of our Episcopal Conferences, for ourselves. This will require that we look honestly at the situation in our countries and our own actions."

Following his words, a lector read a series of questions, punctuated by intervals of reflection, for an examination of conscience.

Among them were the questions: "In the Church of my country, how have we dealt with bishops, priests, deacons and religious accused of sexual assault? What abuses have been committed against children and young people by clergy and others in the Church of my country?"

They were also asked to reflect on what "I know about the people in my diocese who have been abused and violated by priests, deacons and religious."

The bishops were asked to examine their consciences regarding the response of the Church in their country and how they have treated those who have been abused.

"How did we deal with those whose crimes were established? What have I personally done to prevent injustice and establish justice? What have I failed to do?" they were asked.

The final questions looked to the future: "What steps have we taken in my country to prevent new injustice? Did we work to be consistent in our actions? Were we consistent? In my diocese, have I done what is possible to bring justice and healing to victims and those who suffer with them? Have I neglected what is important?"

Following the examination of conscience, the bishops and other religious leaders made a "confession of faults," praying: "Lord Jesus Christ, we confess that we are sinful human beings."

After each of the nine faults, they prayed together: “Kyrie, eleison.”

“We confess that bishops, priests, deacons and religious in the Church have done violence to children and youth, and that we have failed to protect those who most needed our care,” they prayed.

They confessed to shielding the guilty and silencing the harmed, to not acknowledging the suffering of victims, or helping them when needed, and that “often we bishops did not live up to our responsibilities.” They concluded by asking for the mercy of Jesus Christ and forgiveness for their sins.

The penitential liturgy also included the praying of psalms and other prayers; and music by an accomplished violinist who also gave his testimony as a victim of abuse.

The bishops also listened to the Parable of the Prodigal Son and a homily given by Archbishop Philip Naameh of Tamale, the president of the Ghana bishops’ conference.

In his homily, Naameh noted that it is “almost taken for granted” for bishops and religious to preach to sinners on the Parable of the Prodigal Son but forget to apply the Scripture to themselves.

“Just like the prodigal son in the Gospel, we have also demanded our inheritance, got it, and now we are busy squandering it,” he said. “The current abuse crisis is an expression of this.”

“Too often we have kept quiet, looked the other way, avoided conflicts,” the bishop said. “We have thereby squandered the trust placed in us – especially with regard to abuse within the area of responsibility of the Church, which is primarily our responsibility.”

“We have not afforded people the protection they are entitled to, have destroyed hopes, and people were massively violated in both body and soul.”

He pointed out that just like the prodigal son lost his good standing and reputation, the Church’s leaders should not be surprised or complain about suffering the same, including criticism, distrust, and the withdrawal of financial support.

“No one can exempt themselves, nobody can say: but I have personally not done anything wrong,” he stated. “We are a brotherhood, we bear responsibility not only for ourselves, but also for every other member of our brotherhood.”

“What,” he asked, “must we do differently, and where should we start? Let us look again at the prodigal son in the Gospel.”

“For him, the situation starts to take a turn for the better when he decides to be very humble, to perform very simple tasks, and not to demand any privileges. His situation changes as he recognizes himself, and admits to having made a mistake, confesses this to his father, speaks openly about it and is ready to accept the consequences,” he said, according to a Catholic News Agency report.

“There is a long road ahead of us,” he concluded, saying that just as the prodigal son had to do, the bishops must “win over our brothers and sisters in the congregations and communities, regain their trust, and re-establish their willingness to cooperate with us, to contribute to establishing the kingdom of God.”

