

Vatican's global summit on protecting children lays out principles for reform

Soon after the Vatican summit, in which a Nigerian leader spoke of the need to change how the church responds to abuse, secular courts announced convictions of two cardinals.

by [Jack Jenkins](#), with added information in the [March 27, 2019](#) issue



Veronica Openibo, a Nigerian sister and leader of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, speaking at the Vatican global summit on protection of minors in February 2019. RNS photo by Jack Jenkins.

Pope Francis called for eradicating abuse inside and outside the Catholic Church, referring to clergy who abuse children as “tools of Satan,” in his final address to the presidents of all Catholic bishops’ conferences he summoned from across the globe, nearly 190 in total.

“In people’s justified anger, the church sees the reflection of the wrath of God, betrayed and insulted by these deceitful consecrated persons,” Francis said to the bishops and others gathered at the Vatican February 21-24 to address the protection of minors in the church.

He then outlined eight principles for the church: protecting children; rejecting cover-ups; “purification” within the church; better screening for candidates for the priesthood; taking a united approach to the issue across bishops’ conferences; accompanying those who have been abused; confronting child pornography and online abuse; and combating “sexual tourism.”

Soon after the summit ended, news reports were made public that Australian cardinal George Pell had been convicted of sexual abuse of children in church, making the former Vatican economic minister the highest-ranking Catholic priest to be tried and found guilty. The Associated Press reported that while the jury reached its verdict in December, the court forbade publishing it until February 26.

Pell, 77, who maintains his innocence, could receive a sentence of up to 50 years. Vatican News clarified that Pell’s term as the Vatican’s economy minister had ended in February and that “until a definitive resolution of the case against Cardinal Pell, he is prohibited from exercising public ministry, and from any contact whatsoever with minors.”

Meanwhile, French courts on March 7 convicted a cardinal, Lyon archbishop Philippe Barbarin, for failing to tell secular authorities about accounts of sexual abuse of minors in the 1980s and 1990s, which he learned about in 2014–2015, the Associated Press reported. His lawyer planned to appeal.

At the Vatican summit, a German cardinal admitted that church officials had destroyed files documenting sexual abuse.

“Files that could have documented the terrible deeds and named those responsible were destroyed, or not even created,” Reinhard Marx, president of the German bishops’ conference, told church leaders.

Later, in speaking to journalists, Marx explained that he was not referring to the entire church but rather to a recently revealed study of German dioceses. Still, he did not rule out that the practice could occur elsewhere and said he assumed the German case was not an isolated one, according to a Vatican translator.

Two weeks before the summit focusing on abuse of minors, the pope was asked to address the sexual abuse of adult women in religious orders, the Associated Press reported.

“There have been priests and bishops who have,” Francis acknowledged. “It’s continuing because it’s not like once you realize it that it stops. It continues. And for some time we’ve been working on it. Should we do something more? Yes. Is there the will? Yes. But it’s a path that we have already begun.”

The global organization for Catholic women’s religious orders, the International Union of Superiors General, in November denounced the “culture of silence and secrecy” that prevented nuns from speaking out when they’ve been abused.

A strongly worded address at the summit February 23 came from Veronica Openibo, a Nigerian sister and leader of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. She gave a speech on “openness” that derided what she called the church’s “mediocrity, hypocrisy, and complacency” that led to the abuse crisis.

She cited Pope Francis’s own evolution on sexual abuse in the church in Chile. Last year Francis initially defended a bishop accused of shielding a pedophile priest before changing course eventually and accepting the resignations of three Chilean bishops. The nun pointed to the turnabout as an illustration of positive transformation regarding abuse.

“I admire you, Brother Francis, for taking time as a true Jesuit, to discern and be humble enough to change your mind, to apologize and take action,” Openibo said. “This is an example for all of us.”

Openibo also addressed an ongoing debate at the summit about how pertinent abuse reform is to clerics in non-Western nations. Like others, she said, she has heard church leaders in Africa and Asia dismiss sexual abuse as only a problem elsewhere. She noted that her experience teaching about sexuality in Nigeria for several years implied otherwise and said reform was no less pressing because those nations face other problems.

“The fact that there are huge issues of poverty, illness, war, and violence in some countries in the Global South does not mean that the area of sexual abuse should be downplayed or ignored,” she said. — Religion News Service; Christian Century staff

FOLLOWING UP (Updated May 20, 2019): Australian cardinal George Pell was sentenced to six years in prison, the Associated Press reported on March 13. “In my view, your conduct was permeated by staggering arrogance,” said Judge Peter Kidd in the Australian court that sentenced Pell, 77, former archbishop of Melbourne, who

maintains he is innocent. The Vatican opened its own investigation of Pell after his conviction, Vatican News reported.

On May 9 Pope Francis announced that the Vatican is mandating that all priests and men and women in religious orders report sexual abuse or cover-ups by their superiors. Vatican News noted that “this obligation was formerly left up to individual consciences” and that it “covers not only violence and abuse against children and vulnerable adults, but also sexual abuse and violence resulting from an abuse of authority as well. This includes cases of violence against religious by clerics, as well as abuse committed against adult seminarians or novices.”

The Associated Press noted that the new church law provides whistleblower protections. However, the law does not require contacting local police.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Top papal adviser convicted as global summit on abuse concludes at Vatican.”