

Abuse summit preview: 'We need a change in attitude'

As final preparations wrap up before the Feb. 21-24 summit on clergy sexual abuse in Rome, two key participants, Jesuit Father Hans Zollner, president of the Center for Child Protection at Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University and a member of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, and Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, former director of the Holy See Press Office, current president of the Joseph Ratzinger – Benedict XVI Vatican Foundation, and moderator for the upcoming event, spoke to Our Sunday Visitor about what to expect during and after the summit.

"We need to profoundly treat this, without fear," said Father Lombardi, who served as a spokesman for both Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis. "I see this [summit] as a serious test, as a Church and as a society. If we do not combat it, we put our future at stake. We need to be credible.

"We need a change in attitude, in reactions," he added. "For me, the hiding of these cases of children is very serious."

On the first day of the summit, participants will discuss the pastoral and legal responsibilities of bishops. On the second day, they will focus on processes and procedures that bishops or superiors of an order must follow to give an account of his work on the subject. Finally, the third day will be dedicated to transparency – internally and also toward the civil authorities and the people of God.

Father Lombardi estimated that there will be approximately 190 attendees at the upcoming encounter, including some 115 episcopal conference presidents from around the world, leaders from the Oriental Churches, representatives from men's and

women's religious congregations, and some leaders from Roman dicasteries. It's the first time such a gathering will take place at the Vatican. (In 2012, on the initiative of Pope Benedict XVI, the Center for Child Protection at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome promoted a similar initiative, but the participants were simply delegates of local churches and religious orders.)

Given the short three-and-a-half-day program, Father Lombardi pointed out that while some victims/survivors will participate through testimonies or in prayer, the summit is mostly an encounter of "pastors." But he stressed that Pope Francis' order in his letter to bishops' conference presidents ahead of the summit – to meet and speak with victims beforehand – was to be taken seriously.

"To meet the victims, in their territories, speak in their language, hear them, in the same cultural context and understand and see their pain, physically, spiritually, psychologically, and how it has wounded their heart and their faith, is part of the preparation that the pope specifically called for," Father Lombardi said – adding that this type of interaction is a more effective than just listening during the abuse summit.

"When someone meets a victim, sits with him, hears his cry for help, the wounds of the body and the soul, he cannot remain the same. If one really listens, he is transformed," Father Zollner said. "The point is really to open one's ears and heart."

Father Lombardi expressed his hope that the gathering will produce many fruits, including, but not limited to, having those with the most and least experience come together and bridge the gap by sharing experience and perspective.

On whether an outcome of this gathering would be to produce clear guidelines and protocols, which then bishops should use

to react to abuse accusations and findings, Father Lombardi stressed that they are already in place.

“They already existed with (Pope) Benedict XVI in 2010,” he said, adding that the Congregation of the Doctrine for the Faith also stressed this in 2011.

The issue, Father Zollner said, is “how to achieve a change of attitude, and this is more difficult than changing a law,” especially given that “in some parts of the world, the introduction of a law is considered something to be considered and interpreted, where one does exegesis, to understand how to apply it.” Instead, he said, “We need to be active and willing to put the spirit of the law into practice.”

The issue, he said, is putting everything into practice, effectively, in different contexts. “There is most certainly a clear basis on this in canon law, yet there is a need to make it more precise,” Father Lombardi said. He also noted the necessity of following the laws of given countries and places – though, regardless, “sexual abuse of minors in no part of the world is OK.”

“If someone proves to be a public risk, we need to do something,” Father Lombardi said. “We cannot have ... a predator who is out and about creating a ton of damage.”

Already in canon law, it notes that if a bishop is negligent, he can be dismissed. Pope Francis, in his letter *Come una Madre Amorevole* (“Like a Loving Mother”), recalls this point.

The pope’s former spokesman noted that expectations for the three and a half days “need to be proportional.” Though, on the flight from Panama to Rome in late January, Pope Francis alluded to inflated expectations regarding the event, Father Lombardi said the Holy Father did not mean to imply diminished confidence in what the summit has the power to achieve, but rather was being realistic. “This encounter is part of a longer journey,” Father Lombardi said, “one to deepen and

expand the material and guidelines" in existence.

Father Lombardi expressed his two hopes, both focused on solidarity. First, that the bishops leave saying, "Yes, I can do this," feeling very encouraged and empowered with the courage to act. Second, that bishops do not have fear of the people, and instead use any fear and pressure they may feel to empower them to commit themselves to the good of the children and victims.

Father Zollner was careful to not speak about "goals" or "objectives," acknowledging some before Christmas expected this encounter to solve all open Church issues, and now others say it is bound to fail.

"We will do our best, and there is a real possibility here to do something important, especially in groupwork," he said. "It is an occasion we have, as leaders in the Catholic Church, to engage ourselves in doing justice for the victims, by complying with legal obligations. This is a step, but we will need to continue the journey."

Deborah Castellano Lubov writes from Rome.