

# Testimony of victims grounds abuse summit in grim reality



Two months before leaders of episcopal conferences worldwide gathered at the Vatican for a ground-breaking summit on clergy sexual abuse, organizers of the event sent letters to the participating bishops encouraging them to meet with victims of sexual abuse ahead of the convening “to learn first-hand the suffering that they have endured.”

“Absent a comprehensive and communal response, not only will we fail to bring healing to victim survivors, but the very credibility of the Church to carry on the mission of Christ will be in jeopardy throughout the world,” the letter stated. “The first step must be acknowledging the truth of what has happened.”

But organizers also decided that meeting with victims ahead of time wasn’t enough. Victims needed to be present among the bishops, or at least present via video, as they participated in a gathering that never should have had to take place.

It was absolutely the right move. The testimonies of the victims were powerful and raw, and they helped to give and maintain an appropriate context for the event – especially for those attending who hadn’t had extensive experience confronting abuse or meeting with victims.

In the final press conference following the summit, 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, acknowledged the impact of the testimonies. “I’ve heard from many working groups, I’ve heard from many people individually

that they have been transformed,” he said. “When I hear people from Asia and Africa speaking now, in the same language, and with the same determination [saying] we need to confront this, we need to own it, we need to do something about it at home – this is for me the most comforting and hopeful experience and impression I have.”

Some of the testimonies were graphic, some were poetic, some were musical. All were filled with pain and a desire to be heard and believed. A desire for something to change.

“I wanted to tell you about when I was a child. But there’s no point, because when I was 11 years old, a priest from my parish destroyed my life,” related one victim. “Since then I, who loved coloring books and doing somersaults on the grass, have not existed. Instead, engraved in my eyes, ears, nose, body and soul, are all the times he immobilized me, the child, with superhuman strength: I desensitized myself, I held my breath, I came out of my body, I searched desperately for a window to look out of, waiting for it all to end. I thought: ‘If I don’t move, maybe I won’t feel anything; if I don’t breathe, maybe I could die.’”

Eleven years old. It is almost incomprehensible, yet here we are. Pope Francis was right to encourage bishops to listen to victims ahead of the meeting. I pray their ears continue to stay open.

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