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THE CHURCH IN TIMES OF CRISIS:

RESPONSIBILITY OF THE BISHOP

**DEALING WITH CONFLICTS AND TENSIONS
AND ACTING DECISIVELY**

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Introduction and context

We are responding today to a very concrete question in the face of the crisis that we are experiencing in the Church. What is the responsibility of the bishop? In order to understand this responsibility and to assume it, it is imperative that we try to define, as far as possible, the nature of the crisis.

A brief analysis of what has happened shows us that it is not only a matter of sexual deviations or pathologies in the abusers, but that there is a deeper root too. This is the distortion of the meaning of ministry, which converts it into a means to impose force, to violate the conscience and the bodies of the weakest. This has a name: clericalism.

Moreover, in analyzing the way in which this crisis has generally been responded to, we encounter a mistaken understanding of how to exercise ministry that has led to serious errors of authority which have increased the severity of the crisis. This has a name: clericalism.

It is this reality that the Holy Father Pope Francis describes in his letter to God's people in August of last year: *“This is clearly seen in a peculiar way of understanding the Church’s authority, one common in many communities where sexual abuse and the abuse of power and conscience have occurred. Such is the case with clericalism ... To say “no” to abuse is to say an emphatic “no” to all forms of clericalism.”*

Clear words that urge us to go to the root of the problem in order to face it. But it is not easy *“to say “no” to abuse (and thereby) to say an emphatic “no” to all forms of clericalism”*, because it is a mentality that has permeated our Church throughout the ages. Also, we are hardly ever aware that it underlies our way of conceiving ministry and acting at decisive moments. This observation means that it is necessary to unmask the underlying clericalism and bring about a change of mentality; in more precise terms, this change is called conversion.

Fundamentally, our responsibility is a meticulous coherence between our words and our actions. The mentality behind our words must undergo a thorough revision so that our words and actions correspond to God's will in the Church at this time.

This invitation to conversion is addressed to the whole Church, but first of all to us who are her pastors.

I. THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE BISHOP IN LIGHT OF THE OFFICE RECEIVED AND HIS CO-RESPONSIBILITY AS A MEMBER OF THE EPISCOPAL COLLEGE UNDER THE SUPREME AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH

1.1. The Bishop's Responsibility as Pastor

As Bishops, our responsibility begins by constantly increasing our awareness that we are nothing on our own. We can do nothing on our own, since it is not we who have chosen the ministry but the Lord who has chosen us (cf. Jn 15:16-18) to make his salvation present through the acting of the Church, without tarnishing his presence with the darkness of our counter-witness.

Aware of this task, we have to admit that many times the Church - in the persons of her bishops - did not know (and still, at times, does not know) how to behave as she should in order to face the crisis caused by abuses quickly and decisively. We often proceed like the hirelings who, on seeing the wolf coming, flee and leave the flock unprotected. And we flee in many ways: trying to deny the dimension of the denunciations presented to us; not listening to the victims; ignoring the damage caused to the victims of abuse; transferring the accused to other places where they continue to abuse; or trying to reach monetary settlements to buy silence. Acting in this way, we clearly manifest a clerical mentality that leads us to misunderstand the institution of the Church and place it above the suffering of the victims and the demands of justice. This mentality accepts the justifications of the perpetrators over the testimony of those affected. It silences the cry of pain of the victimized so as to avoid the public noise that a denunciation before civil authorities or a trial can provoke. It takes counterproductive measures that ignore the good of the communities and the most vulnerable. Relying exclusively on the advice of lawyers, psychiatrists and specialists of all kinds, it

neglects any deep sense of compassion and mercy. It goes even so far as to lie or distort the facts so as not to confess the horrible reality that presents itself.

This mentality is manifest in the tendency to affirm that the Church is not and need not be subject to the power of civil authority, like other citizens, but that we can and must handle all our affairs within the Church governed solely by Canon Law. This mentality goes so far as to regard the intervention of civil authority as an undue intrusion - which, in these times of growing secularism, can be alleged to be persecution against the faith.

We have to recognize this crisis in its full depth: to realize that the damage is not done by outsiders but that the first enemies are within us, among us bishops and priests and consecrated persons who have not lived up to our vocation. We have to recognize that the enemy is within.

Recognizing and confronting the crisis - overcoming our clerical mentality - also means not to minimize it by asserting that abuses occur on a larger scale in other institutions. The fact that abuses occur in other institutions and groups can never justify the occurrence of abuses in the Church, because it contradicts the very essence of the ecclesial community and constitutes a monstrous distortion of the priestly ministry which, by its very nature, must seek the good of souls as its supreme end. There is no possible justification for not denouncing, not unmasking, not courageously and forcefully confronting any abuse that presents itself within our Church.

We also have to recognize that the press and other media and social networks have been very important in helping us to face the crisis rather than sidestep it. The media do a valuable job in this regard, a job that needs to be supported. As Pope Francis put it in his Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia *“In discussing this scourge, some within the Church take to task certain communications professionals, accusing them of ignoring the overwhelming majority of cases of abuse that are not committed by clergy – the statistics speak of more than 95% –*

and accusing them of intentionally wanting to give the false impression that this evil affects the Catholic Church alone. I myself would like to give heartfelt thanks to those media professionals who were honest and objective and sought to unmask these predators and to make their victims' voices heard. Even if it were to involve a single case of abuse (something itself monstrous), the Church asks that people not be silent but bring it objectively to light, since the greater scandal in this matter is that of cloaking the truth.”

There is no doubt that we have already done a great deal to address the crisis of abuse. However, had it not been for the valuable insistence of victims and the pressure exerted by the media, we might not have decided to face this shameful crisis to this degree. The damage caused is so deep, the pain inflicted is so profound, the consequences of the abuses that have taken place in the Church are so immense that we will never be able to say that we have done all that can be done. It is our responsibility leads us to work every day so that abuses never happen again in the Church and so that those who eventually do perpetrate abuse receive the punishment they deserve and make appropriate amends.

1.2. The responsibility of the bishop as a member of the episcopal college under the supreme authority of the Church

The bishop is not alone in dealing with this crisis and in the process of conversion that he must undergo in order to face it. His ministry is a collegial ministry. By his episcopal ordination, the bishop becomes part of the college formed by all the successors of the apostles under the guidance and authority of the successor of the apostle Peter. More than ever we must feel called to strengthen our fraternal bonds, to enter into true communal discernment, to act always with the same norms and to support each other in making decisions. Our strength can double if deep unity marks our being and acting.

To help us in this task, the popes have enlightened us with their words; and the different dicasteries of the Roman Curia have issued instructions that show us the road we have to travel. We already know how to proceed, but it seems desirable that a “Code of Conduct” be offered to the bishop which, in harmony with the “Directory for Bishops”, clearly shows what the bishop's course of action should be in the context of this crisis. Pope Francis, in his apostolic letter in the form of his motu proprio “Like a loving mother”, presents us with the requirements for a bishop's action and his removal in the case of proven gross negligence. The “Code of Conduct” will clarify and demand of us the conduct that is proper to the bishop. Its obligatory nature will be a guarantee that we all act in unison and in the right direction, since it gives us clear norms to control our conduct and provides concrete suggestions for the necessary corrective measures. It will be a guide for the Church and society as well, allowing everyone to properly assess the bishop's actions in specific cases and giving us all the confidence that we are doing well. It will also be a concrete way of strengthening the communion that is born of episcopal collegiality.

The ongoing formation of the bishop has been a constant concern of the Church. Changing times pose new challenges to which the bishop must respond. As we face this crisis we need to be in a permanent process of being updated, formed and instructed, so that our response will always be the right one. This too is an obligatory matter since the world needs to see perfect unity in our response.

Here again, the crisis calls for a conversion that goes to the depths of our ecclesial acting. The present encounter is a clear sign and a real opportunity to grow in this spirit of communion.

II. THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE BISHOP TOWARDS HIS PRIESTS AND CONSECRATED PERSONS

The bishop also has responsibility for the sanctification of priests and consecrated persons. This responsibility encompasses a wide range of activity that begins with the discernment of the vocation of future priests and consecrated persons, continues in initial formation, and persists throughout the entire existence of those who have been called to a life of total dedication to the service of the Church. In the light of the crisis unleashed by reports of sexual abuse by clerics, this responsibility has acquired special dimensions, in which the closeness of the bishop becomes indispensable. The permanent dialogue - of friend, brother, father - that allows the bishop to know his priests and to accompany them in their joys and sorrows, in their achievements and failures, in their difficulties and successes, is the unwavering manner in which the bishop must travel in his relationship with his priests.

And what is our responsibility to abusive priests? As bishops, we must fulfil our duty to confront immediately the situation that arises from a denunciation. Every denunciation must immediately trigger the procedures that are specified both in canon law and in the civil law of each nation, according to the guidelines established by each episcopal conference. The guidelines help us to distinguish between sin subject to divine mercy, ecclesial crime subject to canonical legislation, and civil crime subject to the corresponding civil legislation. These are fields that should not be confused and which, when properly distinguished and separated, allow us to act with full justice. Today it is clear to us that any negligence on our part can lead to canonical penalties, including removal from ministry, and civil penalties that can even lead to imprisonment for concealment or complicity.

Throughout the canonical process, it is essential that the accused be heard. The bishop's gracious closeness is a first step toward the recovery of the offender. Conscientiously following the guidelines drawn by the episcopal conference allows the bishop to demonstrate for his diocese the route that will be followed in the various cases of accusations of abuse by a cleric. The special care that is taken in this implementation will determine to a large extent whether the case is treated with full justice. But it is not enough to prosecute and convict the accused, when the fault is proven; it is also necessary to provide for his treatment so that there is no relapse.

How justice is implemented concretely in the different processes that deal with abusive clerics is one of the most important factors in overcoming the crisis with regard to the health of priests, since one often hears people say, "Where are the rights of priests?" Yes, there are cases of rightly accused priests and consecrated persons; but this cannot, under any circumstances, justify unfair treatment of the offenders. In the preliminary investigations, in both canonical and civil processes, safeguarding the inalienable rights of the possible perpetrators has been and must always be a concern. Furthermore, it has often been the fear of violating these rights that has led to actions that were later described as cover-up and complicity. However, we must be clear that the rights of the perpetrators - for example, to their good reputation, to the exercise of their ministry, to continue leading a normal life within society - can never take precedence over the rights of the victims, of the weakest, of the most vulnerable.

III. THE BISHOP'S RESPONSIBILITY TO GOD'S FAITHFUL HOLY PEOPLE

How have Catholics reacted to the scandal of abuses by clergy and consecrated persons? There is no unequivocal answer to that, but once again it has

been noted that for the vast majority of both Catholics and non-Catholics, the Church is identified with her priests and consecrated persons. It is the Church that is held responsible for what has happened. This should motivate us to grow ever closer to the people of God who are called to grow each day in their awareness of belonging to the Church and of feeling co-responsible for her.

It is in the context of being close to God's people that we must situate our approach to the victims of abuse. And our first duty is to listen to them. One of the first sins committed at the beginning of the crisis was precisely not having listened with open hearts to those who charged that they had been abused by clerics.

Listening to the victims begins by not minimizing the pain and damage that were caused. In many cases it was thought that the only motive behind the denunciations was to seek financial compensation. “The only thing they are looking for is money” was the recurrent phrase. There is no doubt that accusations are sometimes orchestrated. There is also no doubt that on many occasions, attempts have been made to reduce the redress to the victims in terms of monetary compensation without taking into account the true scope of that reparation. And there is no doubt that on many occasions, we have also given in to the temptation to try to fix unsustainable situations with money in order to silence a probable scandal. This harmful reality must not stop us, however, from becoming aware of our serious and grave responsibility for the redress and compensation of victims. Money can never repair the damage caused, but it becomes necessary in many cases so that the victims can pursue the psychotherapeutic treatments they need, which are generally very expensive. Some victims have been unable to recover from the damage caused; they cannot work and need economic support to survive. For some the pecuniary recognition becomes part of recognizing the damage caused. It is clear that we are obliged to offer them all the necessary means - spiritual, psychological, psychiatric, social - for their recovery.

The responsibility of the bishop is very broad and covers many fields, but it is always inescapable.

Conclusion

In his address to the American cardinals in 2002 St. John Paul II gave the essential direction that all our efforts must follow to overcome the current crisis: “So much pain, so much sorrow must lead to a holier priesthood, a holier episcopate, and a holier Church”. With the Lord's help and with our docility to his grace we will make this crisis lead to a profound renewal of the whole Church with holier bishops, more aware of their mission as pastors and fathers of the flock; with holier priests and consecrated persons, more dedicated to exemplary service to God's people; with a holier people of God, more aware of their co-responsibility to build permanently a Church of communion and participation, where everyone, especially children and adolescents, always finds a safe place that will promote their human growth and their living of the faith. In this way we will contribute to eradicating the culture of abuse in the world in which we live.