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## **PREPARED TEXT**

### **Accountability in a Collegial and Synodal Church**

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Sexual abuse in the Catholic Church and the subsequent failure to address it in an open, accountable, and effective way has caused a multifaceted crisis that has gripped and wounded the Church, not to speak of those who have been abused. Although the experience of abuse seems dramatically present in certain parts of the world, it is not a limited phenomenon. Indeed, the entire Church must take an honest look, undertake rigorous discernment, and then act decisively to prevent abuse from occurring in the future and to do whatever possible to foster healing for victims.

The importance and universal scope of this challenge has prompted Pope Francis to summon us to this meeting, underscoring his commitment and the Church's commitment to addressing this crisis. Even more, by inviting the presidents of national conferences of bishops, he is signalling *how* the Church must address this crisis. For him and for those of us gathered with him, it will be the path of collegiality and synodality. That way of being the Church will then—with God's help—shape and define how the whole Church at the regional, national, local-diocesan, and even parochial levels will take up the task of addressing sexual abuse in the Church. Thus, synodality can truly be lived, by incorporating all

decisions and the resulting measures at all these different levels - on a binding basis. This includes the involvement of lay people, both men and women. In doing so, we should remain honest, and ask ourselves: do we really want this? What are we actually doing towards this? Are we only undertaking alibi measures for a synodal church, and in reality actually wish to remain among ourselves as bishops - in “our” conferences, in “our” commissions, in "our" meetings, in which non-bishops and non-clergy only play an insignificant role? Now is not the time and place to go into detail, but if we do not only speak of a synodal church but also want to live it, then we must also learn to practice other forms of management, and learn how we can conduct synodical processes. If we do not do all of this, then the talk of synodality in the context of the topic of abuse only serves to conceal inconsistent behaviour, i.e. in the critical and difficult field of abuse, deflecting responsibility onto lay people (men and women), but otherwise denying them the opportunity to take responsibility.

Permit me to frame this in a personal perspective. No bishop should say to himself, “I face these problems and challenges alone.” Because we belong to the college of bishops in union with the Holy Father, we all share accountability and responsibility. Collegiality is an essential context for addressing wounds of abuse inflicted on victims and on the Church at large. We bishops need to return to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council often, in order to find ourselves in the larger mission and ministry of the Church. Consider these words from *Lumen gentium*: “The individual bishops, who are placed in charge of particular churches, exercise their pastoral government over the portion of the People of God committed to their care...but each of them, as a member of the episcopal college and legitimate successor of the apostles, is obliged by Christ's institution and command to be solicitous for the whole Church.” (n.23)

The point is clear. No bishop may say to himself, “This problem of abuse in the Church does not concern me, because things are different in my part of the

world.” We are each responsible for the whole church. We hold accountability and responsibility together. We extend our concern beyond our local Church to embrace all the churches with which we are in communion.

As we take up our collegial and collective sense of accountability and responsibility, we will inevitably encounter a certain dialectic. For our collegiality does indeed express the variety and universality of the People of God, but also the unity of the flock of Christ. There is, in other words, an abiding need to appreciate the great diversity in the lived experience of the churches spread throughout the world because of their history, culture, and customs. At the same time, we must also appreciate and foster our unity, our single mission and purpose which is to be “...in the nature of sacrament—a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all people.” (LG, n. 1) In our church, we urgently need further development of intercultural competences, which ultimately must prove their worth by successful intercultural communication, and corresponding well-founded decision-making.

Practically, this means that as we address the scourge of sexual abuse together, that is, collegially, we must do so with a singular and unified vision as well as with the flexibility and adaptiveness that stems from the diversity of people and situations in our universal care.

In this context, we must also ask ourselves fundamentally whether we adequately live what is meant by the concepts of collegiality and synodality. Collegiality and synodality must not only remain theoretical concepts, which are extensively described but not put into practice. In this regard, I still see plenty of scope for further developments. Perhaps we can make progress, if we can clarify the following points.

- It cannot be disregarded that dealing with the topic of abuse in the right way has been difficult for us in the church, for various reasons. We as bishops

also bear responsibility for this. For me, this raises the question: do we really engage in an open conversation and point out honestly to our brother bishops or priests when we notice problematic behaviour in them? We should cultivate a culture of *correctio fraterna*, which enables this without offending each other, and at the same time recognise criticism from a brother as an opportunity to better fulfil our tasks.

- Closely related to this point is willingness to personally admit mistakes to each other, and to ask for help, without feeling the need to maintain the pretence of own perfection. Do we really have the kind of fraternal relationship, where in such cases we don't have to worry about damaging ourselves, simply because we show weakness?
- For a bishop, the relationship with the Holy Father is of constitutive significance. Every bishop is obliged to directly obey and follow the Holy Father. We should ask ourselves honestly, whether on this basis we don't sometimes think that our relationship with the other bishops is not so important, especially if the brothers have a different opinion, and/or if they feel the need to correct us. Do we perhaps ignore the input from our brothers, because ultimately only the Pope can give us orders in any case, and therefore collegiality is easy to ignore, or in such cases has no relevant clout?
- If in such contexts we ourselves always refer back to Rome, we shouldn't wonder if a certain Roman centralism does not sufficiently take into account the diversity in our brotherhood, and our local church competencies and our skills as responsible shepherds of our local churches are not appropriately used, and thereby the practically lived collegiality suffers. If we want to and must revitalise our collegiality, then we also need a discussion between the Roman Curia and our bishops' conferences. We can always only take

responsibility for something insofar as we are allowed to do so, and the more responsibility we are granted, the better we can serve our own flock.

- Whether it is the relationship between us local bishops and Rome, or the relationship of the bishops among themselves, one important aspect should be clear. Collegiality can only be lived and practised on the basis of communication. We must ask ourselves whether we really utilise all forms of modern, regular and sustainable communication, or whether we are still lagging behind. In all honesty, I do believe that we could improve in this regard, for example both in terms of speed of information exchange, as well as in the forms of participation for opinion formation, and the forms of discussion.

I am firmly convinced that there are no real alternatives to collegiality and synodality in our interaction. But before I note some practical consequences for addressing sexual abuse in the Church from a collegial perspective, permit me to summarise the challenge that we face together.

### ***The Challenge of Sexual Abuse in the Church***

The sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable adults in the Church reveals a complex web of interconnected factors including: psychopathology, sinful moral decisions, social environments that enable abuse to happen, and often inadequate or plainly harmful institutional and pastoral responses, or a lack of response. The abuse perpetrated by clerics (bishops, priests, deacons) and others serving in the Church (e.g. teachers, catechists, coaches) results in incalculable damage that is both direct and indirect. Most importantly, abuse inflicts damage on the survivors. This direct damage can be physical. Inevitably, it is psychological with all the long-term consequences of any serious emotional trauma related to a profound betrayal of trust. Very often, it is a form of direct spiritual damage that shakes faith

and severely disrupts the spiritual journey of those who suffer abuse, sometimes spiralling them into despair.

The indirect damage of abuse often results from a failed or inadequate institutional response to the sexual abuse. Included in that kind of indirect and damaging response might be: failure to listen to victims or to take their claims seriously, not extending care and support to victims and their families, giving priority to protecting institutional and financial concerns (for example, by “hiding” abuse and abusers) over and above the care of victims, failing to withdraw abusers from situations that would enable them to abuse other victims, and not offering programmes of formation and screening for those who work with children and vulnerable adults. As serious as the direct abuse of children and vulnerable adults is, the indirect damage inflicted by those with directive responsibility within the Church can be worse by re-victimising those who have already suffered abuse.

(HERE IT IS SUGGESTED THE CARDINAL RELATE A STORY ABOUT HOW A VISIT WITH A VICTIM IMPACTED AND TRANSFORMED HIM)

Addressing sexual abuse in the Church represents a complex and multifaceted challenge, perhaps unprecedented in the Church’s history because of today’s communications and global connections. This makes collegiality even more decisive in our current situation. But how ought a collegial Church respond to that challenge? If we use the elements of collegiality as a lens for viewing and addressing the crisis, we can perhaps begin to make some progress. Surely, addressing the crisis does not mean a quick or definitive resolution. We will need to begin courageously and persevere resolutely on the road together.

For now, I want to indicate three themes that I consider especially important for our reflection: justice, healing, and pilgrimage.

*Justice*

The sexual abuse of others, most especially minors, is rooted in an unjust sense of entitlement: “I can claim this person for my use and abuse.” Although sexual abuse is many things, such as a breach of trust and a betrayal of confidence, it is at root an act of grave injustice. Victim-survivors speak of their sense of being unjustly violated. A fundamental task that belongs to all of us individually and collegially is to restore justice to those who have been violated. There are multiple levels at work in this process of restoration. Of course, we must stand for and promote God’s justice and implement the standards of justice that belong to our Church community. Ecclesiastical law and process must be implemented fairly and effectively. There is, however, more to the story.

The sexual abuse of minors and other vulnerable people not only breaks divine and ecclesiastical law, it is also public criminal behaviour. The Church does not only live in an isolated world of its own making. The Church lives in the world and with the world. Those who are guilty of criminal behaviour are justly accountable to civil authority for that behaviour. Although the Church is not an agent of the state, the Church recognises the legitimate authority of civil law and the state. Therefore, the Church cooperates with civil authorities in these matters to bring justice to survivors and to the civil order.

Complications ensue when there are antagonistic relations between the Church and the state or, even more dramatically, when the state persecutes or stands ready to persecute the Church. These kinds of circumstances underscore the importance of collegiality. Only in a network of strong relationships among the bishops and the local Churches working together can the Church navigate the turbulent waters of Church-state conflict and, at the same time, appropriately address the crime of sexual abuse. There is a double need that only collegiality can address: the need for shared wisdom and the need for supportive encouragement.

## *Healing*

In addition to standing for justice, a collegial Church stands for healing. Certainly, that healing must reach out to the victims of abuse. It must also extend to others who are affected including the communities whose trust was betrayed or severely tested.

For effective healing to happen, there must be clear, transparent, and consistent communication from a collegial Church to victims, members of the Church, and society at large. In that communication, the Church offers several messages.

The first message, directed especially to victims, is a respectful outreach and an honest acknowledgement of their pain and hurt. Although this would seem to be obvious, it has not always been communicated. Ignoring or minimising what victims have experienced only exacerbates their pain and delays their healing. Within a collegial Church, we can summon each other to attentiveness and compassion that enable us to make this outreach and acknowledgement.

The second message must be an offer to heal. There are many paths to healing, from professional counselling to support groups of peers and other means as well. In a collegial Church, we can exercise our imagination and develop these various paths of healing which we can, in turn, communicate to those who are hurting.

A third important message is to identify and implement measure to protect young and vulnerable people from future abuse. Again, it takes a collective wisdom and a shared imagination to develop the ways of protecting young people and avoiding the tragedy of abuse. That can happen in a collegial Church which assumes responsibility for the future.

A fourth and final message is directed to society at large. Our Holy Father has wisely and correctly said that abuse is a human problem. It is not, of course,



limited to the Church. In fact, it is a pervasive and sad reality across all sectors of life. Out of this particularly challenging moment in the life of the Church, we—again in a collegial context—can draw on and develop resources which can be of great service to a larger world. The grace of this moment can actually be our ability to serve a great need in the world from our experience in the Church.

### *Pilgrimage*

As we face the tragedy of sexual abuse in the Church, as we encounter the suffering of victims, we are never more conscious of our status as the pilgrim people of God. We know that we have not yet arrived at our destination. We are aware that our journey has not been along a straight path. The Second Vatican Council captured this so well in *Lumen gentium*: “Already the final age of the world is with us and the renewal of the world is irrevocably under way; it is even now anticipated in a certain real way, for the Church on earth is endowed already with a sanctity that is real though imperfect. However, until there be realised new heavens and a new earth in which justice dwells, the pilgrim Church, in its sacraments and institutions, which belong to this present age, carries the mark of this world which will pass, and she herself takes her place among the creatures which groan and travail yet and await the revelation of the sons and daughters of God.” (n. 48)

To be the pilgrim people of God does not simply mean that we have a certain unfinished status, although that is indeed the case. To be the pilgrim people of God means that we are a community that is called to continuous repentance and continuous discernment. We must repent—and do so together, collegially—because along the way we have failed. We need to seek pardon. We must also be in a process of continuous discernment. In other words, together or collegially, we need to watch, wait, observe, and discover the direction that God is giving us in the circumstances of our lives. There is more ahead of us. As the abuse crisis has

unfolded, we have come to know that there is no easy or quick solution. We are summoned to move forward step by step and together. That requires discernment.

### *Conclusion*

Recently, in a very different context, the bishops of the Congo came together and acted collegially. With great courage and determination, they addressed the social and political challenges of their nation. They did so, not one by one but rather together, collegially. In their mutual and shared support, they brought forth a witness to what lived collegiality can mean and how effective it can be.

As we reflect on the abuse crisis which has afflicted the Church, we do well to draw from their example and recognise the power of collegiality in addressing the most challenging issues that face us.

In order for us to move forward with a clear sense of accountability and responsibility in a context of collegiality, there are—as I see it—at least four requisites which I offer for your consideration.

To take up collegiality in order to address our accountability and responsibility, we must:

- claim, or better reclaim, our identity in the apostolic college united with Peter's successor, and we must do so with humility and openness;
- summon courage and fortitude, because the path ahead is not mapped out with great detail and clear-cut precision;
- embrace the path of practical discernment, because we want to fulfil what God wants of us in the concrete circumstances of our lives;
- be willing to pay the price of following God's will in uncertain and painful circumstances.

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If we do these things, we will be able to move forward collegially on a path of accountability and responsibility. But notice that all these actions are not simply our actions, they are the work of the Holy Spirit: to claim identity or to know who we are, to live with courage and fortitude, to be discerning, and to be generous in service. So, let the last word be *Veni, Sancte Spiritus, veni.*