

Acts of Faith

Why advocates for clergy sex abuse victims call Pope Francis's remarks a 'slap in the face'

By [Abby Ohlheiser](#), [Michelle Boorstein](#) and [Terrence McCoy](#) September 23 at 9:15 PM

Speculation began almost as soon as Pope Francis's first visit to the United States was announced months ago.

Would the popular pontiff – who has spoken boldly on so many controversial topics – address the clergy sexual abuse scandals that have caused many American Catholics to fall away from the church and detracted from his optimistic message of renewal? Would he take time to meet with survivors?

[\[Activists urge Pope Francis to address clergy sexual abuse during U.S. visit\]](#)

In his address to U.S. bishops at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle, he at least partially answered that question.

Francis lauded the bishops for their “courage” in the face of what he called “self-criticism and at the cost of mortification and great sacrifice.”

“I realize how much the pain of recent years has weighed upon you and I have supported your generous commitment to bring healing to victims – in the knowledge that in healing we, too, are healed – and to work to ensure that such crimes will never be repeated,” Francis said.

But it wasn't the answer that many victims' advocates had hoped to hear. They criticized Francis for offering comfort and sympathy to the bishops and praising their bravery while saying little to address the suffering of clergy sex abuse survivors.

“To characterize the response of American Bishops to clergy abuse victims as ‘generous’ and ‘courageous’ is bizarre,” said

John Salvesson, president of the Philadelphia-based Foundation to Abolish Child Sex Abuse and a survivor of clergy sex abuse.

“In reality, the American church hierarchy has treated clergy sex abuse victims as adversaries and enemies for decades,” he said. “His concern about how the abuse crisis has weighed on the bishops' spirits, and his hope that all

of their good deeds will help them heal from the crisis, reflects a profound misunderstanding of the role the church has played in this self-inflicted crisis.”

Barbara Dorris, victims outreach director of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, called Francis’s remarks “a slap in the face to all the victims, that we’re going to worry about how the poor bishop feels.”

“You’re the ones who created it, and now we’re going to feel sorry for what you created?” Dorris said.

It is not yet clear whether Francis will address the scandal again, or meet with survivors during his visit, which will also include stops in New York City and Philadelphia, where he will address a global meeting on family issues in a city that has been rocked over the last decade by abuse allegations.

Several top U.S. church officials said that the pope would meet with survivors, but have been reluctant to give specifics.

A Vatican spokesman declined comment on the pope’s remarks at the cathedral, which were met with lengthy applause by the bishops.

Bernie Nojadera, head of the Secretariat for Child and Youth Protection of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, said the work that Francis praised during Wednesday’s remarks is focused on the victims, and established consequences for bishops who are not following reporting laws when reports of sexual abuse arise.

Francis’s remarks were a “clear message” to bishops in other countries that are still grappling with their own sex abuse crises to take the issue seriously,” he said.

Others, however, said they had expected more from Francis, whose rhetoric advocating broader tolerance has made him one of the most popular pope’s in generations.

This isn’t the first time Francis has waded into the issue. He embraced victims of sexual abuse and asked for their forgiveness at a 2013 Mass “for the sins of omission on the part of church leaders who did not respond adequately to reports of abuse.”

Then in June, about 13 years after the scandals first broke, he launched a Vatican tribunal to punish clergy who try to cover up instances of abuse. He has also created a commission that recommends how best to help survivors.

In the United States, activists have consistently criticized the Catholic Church, which has spent millions on prevention and training, for continuing to fight survivors in legal battles and declining to hold some bishops explicitly accountable.

In 2012, Monsignor William Lynn in Philadelphia became the first priest to be convicted on charges of concealing the crimes of accused priests.

In a poll conducted by the Pew Research Center in June, 53 percent of U.S. Catholics said Francis was doing a good or excellent job of addressing clergy sexual abuse, well below his approval ratings on most other issues.

While the Catholic Church has done more to address the crisis in the United States than church officials have in other countries, most sex abuse survivors have never received an apology from their church leaders, advocates say. They are unable to seek relief in criminal or civil courts because of statutes of limitation and are left with deep scars that can make it challenging to hold a job or have an intimate relationship.

Many activists were hopeful that Francis would add to his earlier momentum in addressing clergy sexual abuse during his visit, though his official itinerary bore no mention of the topic. Now, some advocates say, Francis has dashed hopes that he'll push for more accountability among the clergy and opened the church to fresh criticism that it is more concerned with protecting its own than victims of abuse.

“It’s encouraging that he recognizes [the abuse], but it sounds like it is all aimed at the bishops themselves rather than the survivors,” said Bill Casey, who advocates for survivors with Voice of the Faithful. “If that’s all he says, I think that would be disappointing.”

The remarks run counter to Pope Francis’s image as protector of the most vulnerable, said Marci Hamilton, a law professor at Yeshiva University who has represented hundreds of victims.

“I am surprised, I really did think he’d be the person from the church to say it’s the children and the little ones that matter,” Hamilton said. “For him to take this path is troubling.”

A few survivors offered hope that Francis will return to the subject later in his journey. The pope still has plenty of opportunities, they said, to meet with survivors or address their concerns.

“I think it’s too early to condemn the pope,” said Daniel F. Monahan, who has represented victims of sexual abuse in Philadelphia. “I like to give anyone a benefit of the doubt, and things take time to change. He has time in his papacy to make some progressive changes. . . . I think it’s too early to condemn the pope. I’m sure he’s facing a mountain of opposition from a lot of conservative clergy that don’t agree with him on a lot of things.”

Sarah Pulliam Bailey, Perry Stein and Dana Hedgpeth contributed to this report.