



INCONTRO
LA PROTEZIONE DEI MINORI NELLA CHIESA
Vaticano, 21-24 febbraio 2019

HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE

22 February 2019

PREPARED TEXT

WORKING TRANSLATION

PROTECTION OF MINORS IN THE CHURCH
Meeting of the Holy Father with the Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences
Vatican, New Synod Hall, 22 February 2019

Communion: act together

Linda Ghisoni

Introduction

«It is a new betrayal that comes from within the Church. These people are, to my eyes, howling wolves that penetrate the fold to scare further and disperse the flock, while it should be really they, the Pastors of the Church, to take care of the little ones and protect them».

In this witness of a woman, victim of abuse of conscience, power, and sexuality by priests. These Pastors are “howling wolves” who have denied a priori and who, even after the criminal facts are proved, have made her an object of intimidation and have annihilated her dignity, defining her as “a person who, at most, can pass between the frame and the wall” (useless and denied of all possibilities).

Listening to witnesses such as this is not an exercise of commiseration, it is an encounter with the flesh of Christ in which wounds are not healed, wounds which, as you said, Holy Father, are not prescribed.

Kneeling: this would be the appropriate posture to deal with the topics of these days. Kneeling before the victims and their families, in front of the abusers, their collaborators, those that refuse, those who are unjustly accused, to the negligent, to those who have covered up, to those who tried to speak up and act but silenced, to the indifferent. Kneel before the merciful Father, who sees the lacerated body of Christ, his Church. He sends us to take responsibility, as his People, of the wounds and to cure them with the balm of His love.

I have nothing to teach you, Your Holiness, Your Eminences, Your Lordships, Your Excellencies, Most Reverend Mothers and Reverend Fathers convened here. I believe rather that actively listening to each other; we commit ourselves to work so that in the future we no longer need another clamours event as this meeting. The Church, the People of God, take care, in a competent, responsible and loving way, those people implicated, with what happened, so that the prevention does not end up in a beautiful programme, but becomes an attitude in ordinary pastoral work.

1. Make accountability necessary and possible

In the face of inherent abnormality in every kind of abuse perpetrated against minors, it is necessary; above all, the duty to know what happened, together with the consciousness of its implication, the need for truth, justice, reparation and prevention to achieve the non-recurrence of such abominations.

The knowledge of the abuses and of their entity is, obviously, the fundamental starting point, after all it is not possible to foresee any prevention plan if we do not know what to avoid. However, the knowledge of the facts and the definition of the entity of the phenomenon, although necessary and fundamental, “by itself is not

enough” (FRANCESCO, *Letter to the People of God*, 20 August 2018, n.2). To follow up the above mentioned requirements of truth, justice, reparation and prevention, the assumption of the needed responsibility on the part of those who are invested with it and consequently their duty to make it respected, which is the need for *accountability*.

Accountability imposes a process of evaluation and reporting with respect to choices made and objectives identified and more or less realized. It responds to needs of social character, placing the person who has the responsibility to evaluate not only by himself but also in front of the society in which he lives and for the benefit of which he is called to perform a specific role.

However, accountability in the Church, contrary to what may seem, does not respond primarily to social and organizational needs. And not even - always in the first place - to the need for transparency, to which we are all called to pay special attention for reasons of truth.

Such needs must not be neglected or minimized, are just, after all the Church cannot be separated from what its institutional dimension requires, however these social needs are not the foundation of accountability but is to be sought in the nature of the Church as mystery of communion.

We know that the communion nature of the Church emerges particularly thanks to Vatican II. Although, in truth, neither the dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* nor the other ecclesiological documents seem to expressly emphasize the ecclesiology of communion.

It was necessary to await the extraordinary Synod of Bishops of the year 1985 - convened to “meditate, deepen and promote the application of the teachings of Vatican II twenty years after its conclusion” (JOHN PAUL II, Discourse to the conclusion of the II extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 7 December 1985). So that the category of communion can be elaborated as an interpretative cipher of the Church in the light of revelation. This emerges from the first, direct,

founding reference to the sacramental dimension of the Church, to that Trinitarian mystery in which the Church recognises its real face. Though in a sacramental and therefore analogical form: “*veluti sacramentum*”, “that is, as the sign and instrument of the intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (LG 1).

Basing solely on such a foundation, all action in the Church acquires complete meaning: even an action characterized distinctly by needs of a social character, as accountability may seem, must be brought back to the nature of the Church itself, or to its communal dimension.

What can this mean in our specific area?

Not infrequently, I feel the preoccupation in the Church for the attention that is dedicated to the issue of sexual abuse of minors. A priest, a few days ago, exclaimed “Still? We continue talking about abuse! The Church's attention to this theme is exaggerated”.

Even a practicing lady told me candidly: “It is better not to talk about these matters, otherwise there will be distrust of the Church. Talking about it obscures all the good done in the parishes. If it is seen by the Pope, the Bishops and by the priests themselves”.

To speak, or not about the abuses themselves - of conscience, of power, sexual - obscures the good that is lived in the parishes?!

To these people - and even before to myself - I say that becoming aware of the phenomenon and understand one's responsibility is not a fixation. It is not an accessory inquisitorial action to satisfy mere social needs, but an exigency stemming from the same nature of the Church as a mystery of communion founded in the Trinity. As People of God on their journey, that does not avoid, but faces, with renewed communitarian awareness, even the challenges related to the abuses occurring inside to the detriment of the young undermining and breaking this communion.

2. Some consequent ecclesiological questions

Only by viewing the Church as a sacrament that signifies and realizes the mystery of the Trinitarian communion, is possible to understand correctly the variety of charisms, gifts and ministries in the Church, the variety of roles and functions of the People of God.

2.1 The first crucial question that derives from what has been said is the following. The faithful in the Church do not assign roles and assignments on a social distributive basis for the needs of institutional functioning. We know well that the common priesthood of the faithful, founded on baptism, makes Christians to participate, precisely by virtue of baptism, in the triple *munus* of Christ the priest, king and prophet (see LG 10).

The honest reference, therefore, to the Church as communion, as People of God on journey, demands and urges that all the members of this People, each in their own way, live consequently, the rights and duties to which they have been made to partake in baptism. It is not a matter of grabbing places or functions or of sharing power: the call to be People of God gives us a mission that everyone is called to live according to the gifts received, not alone, but precisely as a People.

2.2 A second important question in the context of our discourse concerns the correct understanding of the ordained ministry, especially in the relationship between the Bishop and priests.

If on the one hand priests are required to be united to their Bishop with sincere love and obedience, recognizing in him the authority of Christ as Supreme Pastor, nonetheless the Bishops, as written in Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* al n. 7, should take “to heart, in all that they can, their [presbyters] material welfare and above all spiritual. In fact, it is the Bishops who are primarily responsible for the grave responsibility of the holiness of their priests: they must therefore take the greatest care of the ongoing formation of their own priests (CD 15-16)”.

A correct relationship between the Bishop and priests leads to a real, taking charge of the priests by the Bishop, materially and spiritually, on which lies in the first place the responsibility for their sanctity.

It is necessary that the priestly ministry, at every level, availing itself of a solid formation, be lived for what it is. As dedicated service to Christ and the Church washing the feet, according to what Jesus did to the apostles, while disappointing many of his contemporaries because he did not exercise the power they expected. The priestly ministry lived as such preserves from every temptation to caress the power, of self-referentiality and self-complacency, of supremacy and exploitation of others to cultivate one's own pleasure at all levels, even sexual.

How many priests, how many Bishops edify us with their ministry, with their life of prayer, dedication and service, establishing healthy, free relations within the People of God. To these priests we say our thanks, encouraging them and supporting them in their life of holiness, and service in the vineyard of the Lord to whom they are called!

2.3 Further note to be underlined, which derives from the view of Church communion, the People of God on their journey, need to interact between the various charisms and ministries. The Church becomes visible and active in her communitarian nature if each baptized person lives and does what is proper to him, if the diversity of charisms and ministries expressed in the necessary cohesion of each one, while respecting differences.

The aforementioned conciliar document of 1965 dedicated to priests stipulated not only "priests must recognize and sincerely promote the dignity of the laity, as well as their specific role in the mission of the Church". It also urged them to be "ready to listen to the opinion of the laity, taking into account with fraternal interest their aspirations and taking advantage of their experience and expertise in the various fields of human activity, so as to be able to recognize the signs of the

times together”. In addition said, “Do not hesitate to entrust the laity with tasks at the service of the Church, leaving them freedom of action and a reasonable margin of autonomy, even inviting them suitably to undertake initiatives on their own with full freedom” (PO 9).

Starting from the *communio* that constitutes the Church, we highlight a necessary diversified contribution of all, not to reclaim the protagonism of someone, but to make visible the multifaceted richness of the Church in respect of the *proprium* of everyone, against the claim that the charism of synthesis is the synthesis of the charisms.

2.4 Finally, it is necessary that the involvement of the whole People of God is necessarily dynamic. The laity, the consecrated are not to be mere executors of orders by clerics, but all are servants in the one vineyard, in which each one contributes with his own contribution being himself involved in the discernment that the Spirit suggests to the Church.

Undoubtedly, the ordained ministry, in its highest degree, the episcopal one, bears upon itself the responsibility of making the ultimate decision, by virtue of the power that is recognized to it, yet cannot act alone or limiting its discernment to a few. It will be vital for the Bishops to make use of the contribution, the Council and discernment that everyone in his Church, including the laity, is capable of, not only for themselves and for personal choices, but as a Church and for the good of the Church in the *hic et nunc* in which they are called to live.

It is always the communal foundation of the Church to show us the way and the method, in this case a dynamism of involvement of the whole People of God that leads to living, walking together, synodality as a shared process, in which each has a different part, diversified responsibilities, but all constitute the one Church. “In fact, as we read in the apostolic constitution *Episcopalis Communio* of 15 September 2018, the totality of the faithful, having the anointing that comes from

the Holy (cfr. 1Jn 2, 20, 27) cannot mistake in believing. Moreover, manifests this belonging through the supernatural sense of faith of the whole People, when ‘from the Bishops to the last lay faithful’, shows his universal consent in matters of faith and morals (LG 12). [...] A Bishop who lives among his faithful has open ears to hear ‘what the Spirit says to the Churches’ (Rev 2: 7) and the ‘voice of the sheep’, even through those diocesan organisms who have the task to advise the Bishop, promoting a loyal and constructive dialogue” (EC 5).

These reflections invite us to avoid two erroneous positions.

A Bishop cannot think that matters concerning the Church can be resolved by him acting alone or exclusively among peers, according to the refrain: “Only a Bishop can know what is good for Bishops”, or, similarly, “Only a priest knows what is good for priests, only a layman for laymen, only a woman for women”, and so on.

Likewise, we can say that it is erroneous, in my view, to argue that the involvement of the laity as such in matters that touch the ordained ministers is a guarantee of greater correctness, as they would be “third parties” with respect to events. From somewhere is invoked: “Let us set up a commission of laymen because it is more credible than a commission of priests, who tend to be less objective, to cover-up and defend a priori”.

As lay woman I must honestly note that among the priests, among the religious, as among the laity there are people who are not free, but would be willing to cover theoretically and collaborate with someone instead of giving a loving, intelligent and free service of the Church and faithful to their own vocation.

Returning to the communal nature of the Church, where the diversity of charisms and ministries are realized does not mean weakening but brings wealth and strength, help to find the reasons to avoid these extreme and unproductive slogans.

3. Ideas for some practical implementation

Having presented the fundamentals and the issues recalled briefly, this meeting gives us the opportunity to know what is being done in the Church. What is to be implemented; to understand if it is true that this meeting convened by the Pope does not constitute the point of arrival or conclusion of a path, validated and perfect. It is equally true that it is not even the starting point, as if we can ignore the magisterial interventions, normative and pastoral interventions so far promoted and the numerous actions that have emerged.

3.1 The first idea is therefore the knowledge and study of those that are already tested and effective, promoted in other ecclesial contexts, to other dioceses. I refer to practices that contemplate the involvement of competent people who represent the whole People of God because every baptized person, animated by the Spirit, is able to express a *sensus fidei* from which the Church cannot exclude.

In this context it is good to recognize the work of those who, in recent years, have dedicated intelligence, heart and hands to this cause by listening to the victims, elaborating protocols, guidelines, reviews and so on, using specific skills drawn from the whole People of God.

Given the diversity due to various cultural and social contexts in which the Church is present, there should not be a *business class* in some particular churches and an *economy class* in others. The one Church of Christ should be expressed everywhere, guaranteeing all, everywhere, tools, procedures, criteria that, beyond the necessary local peculiarities, minors are protected pursuing truth, justice, promoting reparation and prevention in theme of sexual abuse.

3.2 In the National Guidelines, a specific chapter is to be inserted that determines reasons and procedures of accountability. The Bishops and Religious Superiors establish an ordinary verification procedure for the accomplishment of

what is foreseen and a motivation for the actions taken or not, thus not to be in need to have to justify later the reasons for a given behaviour, subjecting it to the needs of the moment, perhaps linked to a defensive action.

To foresee an ordinary procedure of verification that should not be misunderstood as a lack of trust towards the Superior or the Bishop. Rather to be considered as an aid that allows him to focus, first at himself and at the best moment, that is when all the elements are clear and concurrent, the reason for a certain action taken or omitted. To say that the Bishop must always give a report of his work to someone does not mean subjecting him to a control or putting him in a priori distrust, but engaging him in the dynamics of ecclesial communion where all the members act in a coordinated way, according to their own charisms and ministries. If a priest gives report to the community, to the priests and to his Bishop for his work, a bishop to whom does he give a report. What accountability is he subject to? Identifying an objective method of accountability not only does not weaken his authority, but value him as shepherd of a flock, in his own function that is not separated from the people for whom he is called to give life. It may also happen, as for each of us, that from "giving report" springs awareness of an error, it becomes obvious that the path taken was wrong, perhaps because at that moment one thought - wrongly - of acting for the good. This will not constitute a judgment from which to defend oneself in order to recover credit, a stain on one's own honourability, a threat to one's own ordinary and immediate power (cfr. CD 8a). On the contrary, this will be the witness of a journey made together, which alone can find the discernment of truth, justice and charity. The logic of communion does not stand an accusation and a defence, but working together ("con-correre" precisely, only in communion) for the good of all. *Accountability* is therefore a form, today even more necessary, in this logic of communion.

To start locally, on a diocesan or regional level, councils that operate in a coresponsible manner with the Bishops and Religious Superiors, supporting them

in this task with competence. And acting as a place of verification and discernment with regard to the initiatives to be undertaken, even without substituting them or engaging in decisions that fall under the direct jurisdictional responsibility of the Bishop or of the Superior. It can be an example and a model of a healthy collaboration of laity, religious, and clergy in the life of the Church.

3.3 It is desirable that in the territory of each Episcopal Conference, independent consultative commissions are to be created to advise and assist the Bishops and Religious Superiors and to promote a uniform level of responsibility in the various Dioceses. These commissions are composed of lay people, without excluding religious and clerics. It would not be a case of people who judge the Bishops, but of faithful who give their advice and assistance to the Pastors, also evaluating their actions with gospel criteria, and who also inform the faithful of the territory about the appropriate procedures.

These national advisory committees, in turn, through regular reports and meetings, can contribute to ensuring greater uniformity of practices and an increasingly effective confrontation, so that particular Churches learn from each other in the spirit of mutual trust and communion, with the aim of actively taking on and sharing concern for the smallest and most vulnerable.

3.4 It is opportune to examine about a central office - not of accountability that is instead to be evaluated in the local area - to promote the formation of these organisms properly with ecclesial identity. Promote and verify regularly the correct functioning of what had been started at the local level; with attention to the correctness also from the ecclesiological point of view, in a way that the charisms and ministries in the group are all adequately represented and each one can contribute with their own specific participation while preserving the liberty of each other.

3.5 It needs to revise the current legislation on pontifical secrecy, in a way that it protects the values it intends to protect. Namely the dignity of the persons involved, the good reputation of each other, the good of the Church, but at the same time allow the development of a climate of greater transparency and trust, avoiding the idea that the secret is to hide problems rather than to protect the assets at stake.

3.6 It will also be necessary to refine criteria for a correct communication in a time like ours in which the requirements of transparency must be balanced with those of confidentiality: in fact, an unjustified confidentiality, as well as an uncontrolled disclosure, risk generating bad communication and not to render a service to the truth. Accountability is also to know how to communicate. If you do not communicate, how can you be accountable to others? So what communion can there be among us?

Conclusion

These considerations just mentioned regarding the possible actions to be performed as Church, as People of God in communion and with co-responsibility, does not constitute if not for solicitation to a reflection and cross-comparison, especially in group work, in order to stimulate insights and concrete applications. In fact, as the Letter to the People of God urges us, today “we are called upon as the People of God to take on the pain of our brothers wounded in the flesh and in the spirit. If in the past the omission could become a form of response, today we want the solidarity, understood in its deepest and most demanding meaning, to become our way of making present and future history”.