

POLITICS &amp; SOCIETY VATICAN DISPATCH

# The Vatican summit on the protection of minors is over. What's next?

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The recent Vatican summit on the protection of minors ended on Feb. 24. Since then many have asked, "What's next?"

The question often comes from representatives of survivors' organizations who were very active during the summit. At its conclusion, many expressed disappointment at the apparent lack of the "concrete measures" that Pope Francis called for in his opening talk but did not deliver in his closing address. They felt "let down," according to Anne Barrett Doyle of [BishopsAccountability.org](http://BishopsAccountability.org).

But the majority of bishops and religious superiors came away with a very different read on the summit and the pope's closing talk. Several told me "a significant shift" in thinking had taken place within the meeting that augured well for their collective response to the grave abuse crisis that is eroding the church's credibility and undermining its mission throughout the world.

Archbishop Charles Scicluna, in an exclusive interview with **America** at the summit's end, put it this way: "We could see people maturing in their reactions as the days went by.... They were an intense three days, but the experiences of prayer, the listening to victims, the inputs we had were emotionally charged, so there was not only information but also an appeal to our emotional intelligence."

The summit “spoke to the heart of people,” Archbishop Scicluna said. “I think that is where true transformation happens and where the motivation to do the right thing is born and develops.”

Pope Francis called the meeting precisely for this purpose—to bring about a change of hearts, a conversion, a cultural change among bishops and religious superiors worldwide because he knows that without such a change all the papal decrees and changes in Vatican law are unlikely to achieve the desired goal of defeating sexual abuse inside the church.

The summit focused on three aspects that are central to the role of bishops and religious superiors in addressing this crisis: responsibility, accountability and transparency. It also looked at the need for a collegial and synodal response at both the local and universal church levels to the abuse of minors.

The presidents of the bishops’ conferences and the religious superiors returned to their respective communities with some clear ideas to communicate to their fellow bishops or religious superiors. The following ideas may be well known in countries like the United States, Canada, Ireland, Australia and the United Kingdom, but that is not always the case in other parts of the world.

First, they must recognize that this is a universal and serious crisis that is destroying the church’s credibility and must be addressed in every country. Church leaders must address it in a collegial way, as Cardinal Oswald Gracias told summit participants during his keynote address; this means bishops must work together and with Rome in addressing cases of abuse and setting safeguarding standards. They must also address the crisis in a synodal way, involving lay men and women as well as members of religious orders, as Cardinal Blase Cupich explained in his keynote talk.

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Second, bishops and religious superiors must listen to victims, take their allegations seriously and deal with them in a proper and timely way (the vademecum mentioned below is intended to guide them in this). Third, there must be no cover-up of any abuser, whether bishop, priest or religious. Fourth, they have to be transparent in their response to victims and the allegations and keep victim-survivors informed about what is happening in church investigations of their reports. Finally, they must seek to provide all the necessary assistance, including medical and other care, that the victims of abuse may require.

The bishops now may realize, in the words of Archbishop Mark Coleridge of Brisbane, Australia, “We dare not fail”—something the Vatican, too, understands and is seeking to assist bishops around the world with a number of follow-up measures.

The first important one is the preparation of a vademecum or handbook that will serve as a guide for bishops’ conferences and bishops across the globe in dealing with cases of sexual abuse or cover-up. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is preparing this text, but it could take several more months to finalize because, as Archbishop Scicluna explained to **America**, it will need to be up to date with church legislation; it will have to incorporate any new changes in canon law that the pope may soon approve.

Archbishop Scicluna, the Vatican’s top prosecutor of sexual abuse cases, said that Pope Francis “has received suggestions for a change in the law that governs sexual abuse of minors, which is the *motu proprio* ‘Sacramentorum sanctitatis tutela,’” and has already “agreed that concerning pornography, a minor would be a person under 18.” He said another anticipated change concerns the revision of the Vatican laws regarding pontifical secrecy concerning sexual abuse cases and pornography cases.

Advocates for survivors and speakers at the summit, including keynote speakers Linda Ghisoni and Cardinal Reinhard Marx, had called for the revision of these secrecy standards. “Discussion is still ongoing” on this matter “and has to happen

within the congregations in Rome,” Archbishop Scicluna said. He added, “There is a growing feeling that these cases should not be subjected to the pontifical secret.” Archbishop Scicluna said, “The vademecum can be finalized once these developments happen.”

Another important question that will be dealt with in the coming months concerns the question of “the appropriate mechanism for the accountability of bishops.” Archbishop Scicluna explained that “this has to be reviewed on the level of procedures at the Holy See but certainly also, after the request of the American bishops, concerning the local level.” This will mean “either a review of the motu proprio ‘As a loving mother’ or a by-law or regulations implementing this motu proprio that would address these two levels.”

Changes are also expected to follow a review of the canon law procedures for penal trials, according to the Maltese archbishop. He disclosed that “the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts is preparing the revision of the book concerning penal sanctions and penal procedures,” and “there are suggestions that a role is given to victims as the aggrieved body.” This would mean that victims would have a part in such trials and “would also be party to the administrative procedure.” The archbishop is in favor of this.

Federico Lombardi, S.J., the moderator of the summit, speaking at the final briefing for the press on Feb. 24, announced some other follow-up initiatives that will be made public soon. He mentioned two laws and a set of guidelines for Vatican City State and its pastoral equivalent, the Vicariate of the Holy See. Archbishop Scicluna explained that these involve “changes in the penal law of the Vatican City State concerning the abuse of minors, reporting mechanisms and the statute of limitations.”

Moreover, he said, “we are talking about this law being extended, by a special law, for members of the Roman Curia even if they are not operating within the territory of Vatican City State, so that would include diplomats [also in nunciatures] or

members of congregations or dicasteries that are not within the territory of V. C. S. but are around the city of Rome.” It will also include “guidelines which are the equivalent of guidelines that bishops have in their dioceses because the pope has also at heart the pastoral care of people either living or visiting the V. C. S.”

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Archbishop Scicluna explained that there are few resident children in the Vatican City State, but “there are lots of visitors.” Moreover, “there is also a pre-seminario that houses a number of young people that serve at Masses in the basilica, and then you have the pueri cantores of the Sistine Choir who don’t live there but study there, have rehearsals and also take part in the celebrations of the Holy Father.” Because of the presence of these and other children and youth within Vatican City, the archbishop said he considers it “very important to have those guidelines.”

In addition to the legislative issues mentioned above, there will also be “task forces” to help bishops in local churches that may lack the necessary resources to deal with the abuse question. “These are not about exercising jurisdiction over bishops,” Archbishop Scicluna said. “They relate to facilitating churches’ prevention guidelines.” Details about the task forces will be made known later.

Before and during the summit, advocates representing victim-survivor organizations emphasized the vital importance that the meeting should affirm a zero-tolerance approach. Several expressed disappointment that Pope Francis did not mention this standard or use the term “zero tolerance” in his closing talk—especially since he has used the expression on other occasions.

Asked about what that omission says about the Vatican’s understanding of zero tolerance, Archbishop Scicluna first recalled that “the Holy See, already in 2003, approved a special law for the United States that says that a person who is guilty of sexual abuse cannot remain in the ministry.” Furthermore, he said, “we have a number of important churches that already adopt the principle that a person

condemned of the sexual abuse of minors will be removed from ministry. We are talking about the United States of America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, England and Wales, Scotland, Ireland. So there's a huge number of conferences that already adopt the principle."

So, he said, "when people ask for this to be universal, they are talking about the experience of these established churches that have suffered a lot, that the crisis has cost them so much."

Archbishop Scicluna, whom Pope Francis appointed some months ago as adjunct secretary at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, giving him a crucial role in dealing with the whole abuse crisis, told **America**, "We all go back to what John Paul II said on April 23, 2002, that 'people need to know that there is no place in the priesthood and religious life for those who would harm the young.'"

He stated, moreover, "it is now acquired wisdom that, first of all, sexual abuse is egregious, but equally egregious is cover-up, and, secondly, that what applies to priests also applies to bishops."

Pope Francis appointed a special committee of four members to prepare for the summit—Cardinals Cupich and Gracias and Archbishop Scicluna; and Hans Zollner, S.J., as summit coordinator. This group is now also overseeing the follow-up to the summit in close collaboration with members of the Roman Curia. They already held a number of meetings after the summit's end, including one with the heads of all the Roman congregations last Monday and will meet again in the coming weeks.

Stay tuned.

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