

LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS TO THE PEOPLE OF GOD

"If one member suffers, all suffer together with it" (*1 Cor 12:26*). These words of Saint Paul forcefully echo in my heart as I acknowledge once more the suffering endured by many minors due to sexual abuse, the abuse of power and the abuse of conscience perpetrated by a significant number of clerics and consecrated persons. Crimes that inflict deep wounds of pain and powerlessness, primarily among the victims, but also in their family members and in the larger community of believers and nonbelievers alike. Looking back to the past, no effort to beg pardon and to seek to repair the harm done will ever be sufficient. Looking ahead to the future, no effort must be spared to create a culture able to prevent such situations from happening, but also to prevent the possibility of their being covered up and perpetuated. The pain of the victims and their families is also our pain, and so it is urgent that we once more reaffirm our commitment to ensure the protection of minors and of vulnerable adults.

1. If one member suffers...

In recent days, a report was made public which detailed the experiences of at least a thousand survivors, victims of sexual abuse, the abuse of power and of conscience at the hands of priests over a period of approximately seventy years. Even though it can be said that most of these cases belong to the past, nonetheless as time goes on we have come to know the pain of many of the victims. We have realized that these wounds never disappear and that they require us forcefully to condemn these atrocities and join forces in uprooting this culture of death; these wounds never go away. The heart-wrenching pain of these victims, which cries out to heaven, was long ignored, kept quiet or silenced. But their outcry was more powerful than all the measures meant to silence it, or sought even to resolve it by decisions that increased its gravity by falling into complicity. The Lord heard that cry and once again showed us on which side he stands. Mary's song is not mistaken and continues quietly to echo throughout history. For the Lord remembers the promise he made to our fathers: "he has scattered the proud in their conceit; he has cast down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty" (*Lk 1:51-53*). We feel shame when we realize that our style of life has denied, and continues to deny, the words we recite.

With shame and repentance, we acknowledge as an ecclesial community that we were not where we should have been, that we did not act in a timely manner,

realizing the magnitude and the gravity of the damage done to so many lives. We showed no care for the little ones; we abandoned them. I make my own the words of the then Cardinal Ratzinger when, during the Way of the Cross composed for Good Friday 2005, he identified with the cry of pain of so many victims and exclaimed: "How much filth there is in the Church, and even among those who, in the priesthood, ought to belong entirely to [Christ]! How much pride, how much self-complacency! Christ's betrayal by his disciples, their unworthy reception of his body and blood, is certainly the greatest suffering endured by the Redeemer; it pierces his heart. We can only call to him from the depths of our hearts: *Kyrie eleison* – Lord, save us! (cf. *Mt 8:25*)" (Ninth Station).

2. ... all suffer together with it

The extent and the gravity of all that has happened requires coming to grips with this reality in a comprehensive and communal way. While it is important and necessary on every journey of conversion to acknowledge the truth of what has happened, in itself this is not enough. Today we are challenged as the People of God to take on the pain of our brothers and sisters wounded in their flesh and in their spirit. If, in the past, the response was one of omission, today we want solidarity, in the deepest and most challenging sense, to become our way of forging present and future history. And this in an environment where conflicts, tensions and above all the victims of every type of abuse can encounter an outstretched hand to protect them and rescue them from their pain (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 228). Such solidarity demands that we in turn condemn whatever endangers the integrity of any person. A solidarity that summons us to fight all forms of corruption, especially spiritual corruption. The latter is "a comfortable and self-satisfied form of blindness. Everything then appears acceptable: deception, slander, egotism and other subtle forms of self-centeredness, for 'even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light' (*2 Cor 11:14*)" (*Gaudete et Exsultate*, 165). Saint Paul's exhortation to suffer with those who suffer is the best antidote against all our attempts to repeat the words of Cain: "Am I my brother's keeper?" (*Gen 4:9*).

I am conscious of the effort and work being carried out in various parts of the world to come up with the necessary means to ensure the safety and protection of the integrity of children and of vulnerable adults, as well as implementing zero tolerance and ways of making all those who perpetrate or cover up these crimes accountable. We have delayed in applying these actions and sanctions that are so necessary, yet I am confident that they will help to guarantee a greater culture of care in the present and future.

Together with those efforts, every one of the baptized should feel involved in the ecclesial and social change that we so greatly need. This change calls for a personal and communal conversion that makes us see things as the Lord does. For as Saint John Paul II liked to say: "If we have truly started out anew from

