

Child Sex Abuse Akin to 'Satanic Mass,' Pope Says

Pope Francis said on Monday that he will have his first meeting with a group of sex abuse victims at the Vatican early next month and said he would show zero tolerance for anyone in the Catholic Church who abused children, including bishops.

"Sexual abuse is such an ugly crime ... because a priest who does this betrays the body of the Lord. It is like a satanic Mass," he said in some of the toughest language he has used on a crisis that has rocked the Church for more than a decade. "We must go ahead with zero tolerance," he said, adding that three bishops were currently under investigation.

Francis said he would meet with eight victims and Cardinal Sean Patrick O'Malley of Boston, who is head of a commission set up to study ways of dealing with the crisis.

Speaking to reporters for nearly an hour on the plane taking him back from a visit to the Middle East, the pope looked alert despite the gruelling three-day trip and overruled his spokesman who suggested the airborne news conference should be cut short to allow him to rest.

The 77-year-old pontiff fielded questions on a range of topics, including Vatican finances, priestly celibacy, his concern for the environment, and whether he himself would one day retire like his predecessor Benedict XVI instead of serving for life. The concept of a "pope emeritus" could someday become normal in the Church, he said.

During his trip he invited Israeli President Shimon Peres and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to the Vatican next month.

He said that the meeting would not be a mediation but a prayer meeting that he hoped could encourage the stalled peace

process.

The pope also said he believes that Roman Catholic priests should be celibate but the rule was not an unchangeable dogma, and “the door is always open” to change. It was something he has said before his election but it was the first time he made the remark as pope.