

Pope Francis Could Purge Catholic Hierarchy

Thirty-four Chilean bishops summoned to the Vatican over a cover-up of sexual abuse by clergy began crisis meetings with Pope Francis on Tuesday that could result in a purge of Chile's Catholic hierarchy.

"We feel pain and shame," Fernando Ramos, an auxiliary bishop of Santiago, told a news conference ahead of the three days of closed-door meetings.

The scandal has devastated the credibility of the Church in the once staunchly Catholic country. It has also hurt the pope's own image because this year he strongly defended a bishop accused in the alleged cover-up before reversing his position.

Bishop Juan Ignacio Gonzalez of the city of San Bernardo said he could not rule out some of the tainted bishops resigning or being sacked, as many Chileans have demanded.

"It does not depend on us. Each person must decide this together with the pope," he said.

One of the key bishops in the crisis is Juan Barros, whom the pope appointed to the southern city of Osorno in 2015 despite allegations that he had covered up sexual abuse of minors by his mentor, Father Fernando Karadima. Barros has said he was unaware of any wrongdoing.

Luis Badilla, a Rome-based Chilean commentator for the Vatican-affiliated blog "Il Sismografo," called for "exemplary and educational decisions" by the pope to put the Chilean Church back on course.

During his trip to Chile in January, the pope said he had no

proof against Barros, believed he was innocent, and that accusations against him were “slander” until proven otherwise.

But days after returning to Rome, the pope, citing new information, sent sexual abuse investigator Archbishop Charles Scicluna of Malta to Chile to speak to victims, witnesses and other Church members. He produced a 2,300-page report that will be discussed at the Vatican meetings.

Victims Felt Demonized, Discredited

Victims have also accused other bishops of either covering up the abuse by Karadima, of delaying investigations, or of discrediting victims in the media and demonizing them in private conversations and emails.

Last month, Francis held four days of meetings with Juan Carlos Cruz, James Hamilton and Jose Andres Murillo, three men abused by Karadima when they were teenagers in Santiago.

They said in a statement afterwards that they had been “treated as enemies” by Chilean Church leaders for 10 years.

Karadima, who trained some of the bishops for the priesthood decades ago, was found guilty in a Vatican investigation in 2011 of abusing boys in Santiago in the 1970s and 1980s.

He never faced civilian justice because of the statute of limitations. Now 87 and living in a nursing home in Chile, Karadima has always denied the allegations.

At the pre-meeting news conference, Gonzalez said he had met many victims and knew the three who met the pope last month.

One of the victims, Cruz, later tweeted: “I’ve never seen him before in my life. The truth according to the bishops of Chile is very different from what we all have lived.”

In a stern statement last Saturday, the Vatican indicated that the pope intended to be tough.

It spoke of “cover-ups and grave omissions regarding the victims” and said the meetings would seek to determine “collective and individual responsibility for these devastating wounds.”

In a homily at his daily morning Mass on Tuesday, without specifically mentioning Chile, Francis said every bishop should know “when it’s time to take his leave and step down.”
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