

Pope on Sexual Abuse Cover-up: 'I Was Part of the Problem'

Pope Francis told Chilean victims of clerical sexual abuse "I was part of the problem" and apologized for dismissing accusations of a cover-up by Catholic bishops, one of the victims said on Wednesday.

At an emotional news conference after four days of private meetings with the pope, three men who were victims of Chile's most notorious pedophile urged Francis to take action against several Chilean bishops.

"For almost 10 years we have been treated as enemies because we fight against sexual abuse and cover-up in the Church," Juan Carlos Cruz, James Hamilton and Jose Andres Murillo, said in a joint statement read out to reporters.

The three men, who were guests of the pope at his residence, said that during their long conversations, Francis had been attentive, receptive and very empathetic.

"I have never, never seen someone be so contrite ... I felt that he was hurting, which for me was very solemn. It's not often that the pope says sorry to you and apologizes to you for something," Cruz said in response to a question.

"He (the pope) said 'I was part of the problem, I caused this and I apologize to you,'" Cruz said. "I believe that he was sincere."

In a dramatic U-turn last month, Pope Francis said in a letter to Chilean bishops that he had made "grave mistakes" in the handling of the sexual abuse crisis there, saying he felt shame for what had happened.

The letter followed a Vatican investigation into Bishop Juan Barros, who was appointed by the pope 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.

EYE-OPENING REPORT

In his letter to Chilean bishops last month, Francis said there had been a “lack of truthful and balanced information” about the situation in Chile before he sent the Vatican’s most experienced investigator of sexual abuse, Archbishop Charles Scicluna of Malta, to investigate.

“Scicluna really opened his (the pope’s) eyes,” Cruz said.

Scicluna produced a 2,300-page report, which prompted the pope to summon the bishops to Rome for a meeting this month.

“We are waiting for action. We are not here to do public relations,” said Murillo when asked what he wanted Francis to do.

Hamilton said the pope had told him “there is no turning back now.”

All three agreed the pope should follow through by taking action against Barros and other bishops they say covered up the abuse by Karadima and discredited their claims.

“I went to (Church officials in Chile) for help when I was dying inside and they killed a second time,” Hamilton said of the bishops who ignored him even though there was overwhelming evidence against Karadima.

Hamilton called the bishops who he said had covered up the abuse “criminals” who deserved to be jailed.

Karadima was found guilty in a Vatican investigation in 2011

of abusing boys in Santiago in the 1970s and 1980s. But 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 and Barros said he was unaware of any wrongdoing.

The joint statement said they told the pope he had to do something about the “pathological and unlimited exercise of power” in the Church that can foster abuse.