

# 'I was part of the problem,' Francis tells Chilean abuse victims

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*Gerard O'Connell, America magazine*

'I was part of the problem! I caused this. I am very sorry, and I ask your forgiveness,' Pope Francis has told the Chilean victims of sexual abuse and cover up when he met them in two-hour personal encounters, and then as a group, in the Vatican over the past days.

*Chilean clerical sex abuse survivors Juan Carlos Cruz, James Hamilton and Jose Andres Murillo prepare to speak to the media at the Foreign Press Association building in Rome May 2.*  
(CNS photo/Paul Haring).



'It is not up to us to carry out the necessary transformation in the church to stop the epidemic of sexual abuse and cover up. We hope that Pope Francis transforms his loving words of forgiveness into exemplary actions. Otherwise all this will be in vain.'

That is what the three best known Chilean victims of abuse—Juan Carlos Cruz, James Hamilton and Andrés Murillo—told a crowded press conference in Rome after having spent a week as the pope's guests at Santa Marta, the Vatican guesthouse where he lives, and sharing with him their history and their proposals.

'For almost ten years we have been treated as enemies because we fight against sexual abuse and cover up in the Church. These days we met the friendly face of the Church, completely different from the one we have seen before,' they said in a statement given to the press.

All three were victims of Chile's most notorious predator priest, Father Fernando Karadima, whom the Vatican condemned at the age of 80 to a life of prayer and penance. All three blame Bishop Juan Barros of Osorno for being present when they were abused and covering this up, though he denies it. In fact, they blame those who covered up even more than their abuser.

Mr. Cruz said that while it 'hurt' them that Pope Francis defended Bishop Barros and accused them of calumny during his visit to Chile, they now recognize that he was badly informed and on his return to Rome he understood the disaster in the country and so sent Archbishop Charles Scicluna and Father Jordi Bertomeu to listen to the victims and other witnesses. They said that when his envoys reported back to him

his eyes were opened and he understood the reality of their situation, and so invited them to ask forgiveness, to listen to them and to hear their proposals to avoid a repetition of such abuse. He also summoned the bishops who will come to meet him May 14-17. They expect him to take action after that meeting.

'Pope Francis formally asked us for forgiveness, in his own name and on behalf of the universal Church. We recognize and appreciate this gesture and the enormous generosity and hospitality of these days,' they said in their statement.

Speaking to the press, they spoke very positively about their individual meetings with the pope and told more than 100 journalists from the international and Italian media at a conference at the Stampa Estera (Foreign press association), 'we were able to speak frankly and respectfully with the Pope. We talked about difficult issues, such as sexual abuse, abuse of power and especially the cover-up of the Chilean bishops,' which they said they refer to not as 'sins' but as 'crimes and corruption, that do not end in Chile, but are an epidemic' that has 'destroyed thousands of lives.'

They said, 'the pope was very attentive, receptive, and very emphatic during the intense and long hours of conversation.' They said that he asked them 'to keep generating ideas and suggestions,' which they promised to do in the coming days.

In the press conference that was being transmitted by live-television to Chile, each one identified the thing that struck them most in their personal encounters with Francis.

Juan Carlos Cruz, 55, the best known of the victims and an executive in the communications field who now lives in the United States, said he spoke three hours alone with Pope Francis. He told the press, 'I have never, never seen someone being so contrite about what he was telling me. The pope was truly sorry about what he told me. I felt he was also hurting. That for me was a very solemn moment.'

Mr. Cruz said that when he told the pope that he accepted his expression of forgiveness, Francis told him, 'I was part of the problem! I caused this, and I am very sorry! He asked me pardon from the heart.'

He said another important moment was when he was able to tell the pope about 'so many people who were not as lucky as we are and who died crying.' He was referring to the many who committed suicide as a result of their abuse and the failure of the church to help them.

James Hamilton, 52, a well-known gastroenterologist in Chile, described his face-to-face conversation with the pope as 'very good, very respectful, very sincere and a healing encounter.' 'He asked us for help and to pray for him. We met a real human being,' but, he said, the most important moment came when the pope told him 'there is no turning back.'

Andrés Murillo, 43, a philosopher and teacher in Chile who now does much work with children and young people who are abused, said he too believed the pope 'was sincere' when he asked forgiveness but, for him, the most 'surprising moment was when he said sexual abuse is not a sin, it is corruption. At that moment I felt he understood and will do something important.'

In their personal conversations with Francis, they said they spoke about many things. Mr. Murillo emphasized that 'Chile does not have a monopoly on sexual abuse, it is an epidemic elsewhere in the world too.' He praised the many priests, religious and lay people who are fighting this epidemic and recalled in particular Barbara Blaine in the United States, the founder of the Survivor Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, who died last year.

'We didn't shy away from talking about difficult things, and when we spoke about bishops and others who cover up we talked with great detail,' Mr. Cruz added. He said he named not only Bishop Barros, but also the other bishops that were part of the Karadima group. He also told the pope about the exchange of emails between Cardinals Ricardo Ezatti and Francisco Errazuriz in which they called him 'a serpent' and worked to block his being appointed as a member of the Papal Commission to Protect Minors.

James Hamilton strongly denounced Cardinal Errazuriz as 'a criminal who covered up' because he knew about the crimes of Father Karadima since 2002, when Mr. Murillo gave him a letter detailing them and later when Hamilton gave sworn testimony about the same, but he did nothing, 'he covered up Karadima's crimes for more than five years.'

He denounced both cardinals as 'criminals that covered up' and recalled that when he went 'to ask for help when I was dying inside, they killed me once again.' He said he would like to see them both in prison. He made a public appeal to the president of Chile to remove the statute of limitations on sexual abuse cases.

Questioned as to whether he had asked the pope if he had read his letter that Cardinal O'Malley had given Francis in 2015, Mr. Cruz said he had not, but he said it was clear that the pope was badly informed about their situation. But now, at his own request, he is fully informed of the reality of the abuse and cover up in Chile.

Mr. Murillo told the press, 'We asked the Pope not to let his hand tremble before the crimes and corruption that has happened in Chile.' He said they also reminded him that this same reality is happening in other parts of the world too.

'We are facing the greatest crisis of the church in history, it is an internal crisis that is killing the faith from within, and [the church's] credibility,' Mr. Hamilton stated. But he said he and his companions are hopeful that their visit has helped to turn a new page in the Vatican.

'We all deserve a second chance. If we do not see change we will continue our fight for all those who suffer abuse in the world. If we see change, we will be the first to come and help the pope,' Mr. Hamilton concluded.