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Declaration by the Director of the Holy See Press Office: Protecting minors

Vatican City, 4 March 2016 – The director of the Holy See Press Office, Fr. Federico Lombardi, S.J., today issued the following note regarding the protection of minors from sexual abuse:

"The depositions of Cardinal Pell before the Royal Commission as part of its inquiry carried out by live connection between Australia and Rome, and the contemporary presentation of the Oscar award for best film to 'Spotlight', on the role of the Boston Globe in denouncing the cover-up of crimes by numerous paedophile priests in Boston (especially during the years 1960 to 1980) have been accompanied by a new wave of attention from the media and public opinion on the dramatic issue of sexual abuse of minors, especially by members of the clergy.

The sensationalist presentation of these two events has ensured that, for a significant part of the public, especially those who are least informed or have a short memory, it is thought that the Church has done nothing, or very little, to respond to these terrible problems, and that it is necessary to start anew. Objective consideration shows that this is not the case. The previous archbishop of Boston resigned in 2002 following the events considered in "Spotlight" (and after a famous meeting of American cardinals convoked in Rome by Pope John Paul II in April 2002), and since 2003 (that is, for 13 years) the archdiocese has been governed by Cardinal Sean O'Malley, universally known for his rigour and wisdom in confronting the issue of sexual abuse, to the extent of being appointed by the Pope as one of his advisers and as president of the Commission instituted by the Holy Father for the protection of minors.

The tragic events of sexual abuse in Australia, too, have been the subject of inquiries and legal and canonical procedures for many years. When Pope Benedict XVI visited Sydney for World Youth Day in 2008 (eight years ago), he met with a small group of victims at the seat of the archdiocese governed by Cardinal Pell, since the issue was also of great importance at the time and the archbishop considered a meeting of this type to be very timely.

Merely to offer an idea of the attention with which these problems have been followed, the section of the Vatican website dedicated to 'Abuse of minors: the Church's response', established around ten years ago, contains over 60 documents and interventions.

The courageous commitment of the Popes to facing the crises that subsequently emerged in various situations and countries – such as the United States, Ireland, Germany, Belgium and Holland, and in the Legionaries of Christ – has been neither limited nor indifferent. The universal procedures and canonical norms have been renewed; guidelines have been required and drawn up by the Episcopal Conferences, not only to respond to abuses committed but also to ensure adequate prevention measures; apostolic visitations have taken place to intervene in the most serious situations; and the Congregation of the Legionaries has been radically reformed. These are all actions intended to respond fully and with far-sightedness to a wound that has manifested itself with surprising and devastating gravity, especially in certain regions and certain periods. Benedict XVI's Letter to the Irish faithful in March 2010 probably remains the most eloquent document of reference, relevant beyond Ireland, for understanding the attitude and the legal, pastoral and spiritual response of the Popes to these upheavals in the Church in our time; recognition of the grave errors committed and a request for forgiveness, priority action and justice for victims, conversion and purification, commitment to prevention and renewed human and spiritual formation.

The encounters held by Benedict XVI and Francis with groups of victims have accompanied this by now long road with the example of listening, the request for forgiveness, consolation and the direct involvement of the Popes.

In many countries the results of this commitment to renewal are comforting; cases of abuse have become very rare and therefore the majority of those considered nowadays and which continue to come to light belong to a relatively distant past of several decades ago. In other countries, usually due to very different cultural contexts that are still characterised by silence, much remains to be done and there is no lack of resistance and difficulties, but the road to follow has become clearer.

The constitution of the Commission for the protection of minors announced by Pope Francis in December 2013, made up of members from every continent, indicates how the path of the Catholic Church has matured. After establishing and developing internally a decisive response to the problems of sexual abuse of minors (by priests or other ecclesial workers), it is necessary to face systematically the problem of how to respond not only to the problem in every part of the Church, but also more broadly how to help the society in which the Church lives to face the problems of abuse of minors, given that – as we should all be aware, even though there is still a significant reluctance to admit this – in every part of the world the overwhelming majority of cases of abuse take place not in ecclesiastical contexts, but rather outside them (in Asia, for instance, tens of millions of minors are abused, certainly not in a Catholic context).

In summary, the Church, wounded and humiliated by the wound of abuse, intends to react not only to heal herself, but also to make her difficult experience in this field available to others, to enrich her educational and pastoral service to society as a whole, which generally still has a long path to take to realise the seriousness of these problems and to deal with them.

From this perspective the events in Rome of the last few days may be interpreted in a positive light. Cardinal Pell must be accorded the appropriate acknowledgement for his dignified and coherent personal testimony (twenty hours of dialogue with the Royal Commission), from which yet again there emerges an objective and lucid picture of the errors committed in many ecclesial environments (this time in Australia) during the past decades. This is certainly useful with a view to a common 'purification of memory'.

Recognition is also due to many members of the group of victims who came from Australia for demonstrating their willingness to establish constructive dialogue with Cardinal Pell and with the representative of the Commission for the protection of minors, Fr. Hans Zollner S.J., of the Pontifical Gregorian University, with whom they further developed prospects for effective commitment to the prevention of abuse.

If the appeals subsequent to 'Spotlight' and the mobilisation of victims and organisations on the occasion of the depositions of Cardinal Pell are able to contribute to supporting and intensifying the long march in the battle against abuse of minors in the universal Catholic Church and in today's world (where the dimensions of these tragedies are endless), then they are welcome.