



**AN EXHORTATION**

**TO THE NEW POPE**

***“WE THE CHILDREN OF THE CHURCH”***

*We, once the children of the Church, carry in our bodies and memories the invisible wounds of sexual violence—our own spiritual stigmata. Yet our collective voice, rising from what was once unspeakable, is an act of resurrection. It restores the humanity that was violently taken from us and by it we are able to begin a new life.*

May 8, 2025



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SURVIVORS NETWORK OF THOSE  
ABUSED BY PRIESTS  
PO Box 16376  
Chicago, IL 60616, United States

His Holiness  
Apostolic Palace  
00120 Vatican City

Thursday, May 8, 2025

We are writing to you as the world's oldest and largest organization representing survivors of rape, sexual assault, and abuse by priests, religious, nuns, lay ministers, and volunteers in the Catholic Church. For over 35 years, we have supported more than 25,000 survivors worldwide. In the lead-up to the conclave that elected you, we launched a new global survivor initiative, Conclave Watch, a database detailing the records of how the cardinals that have elected you have facilitated and concealed cases of clergy abuse.

Once, we were the children of the church.

***The sex offender always commits two crimes: first, they steal the body, and then, they steal the voice.***

Many of the cardinals that elected you covered up the crimes committed against us, and the priests and others who assaulted us hold significantly greater social value and prestige than any of us, individually or collectively. The theatre and international acclaim that surrounded your election unmistakably demonstrates this. It is not natural at a time like this to want to know about the kind of sexual and spiritual affliction visited upon us as children. Such knowledge disrupts and threatens the ordinary functioning of the church. Who, when engaged in prayer and praise for your ascension, wants to know about this disavowed and obscene underside of your church? No one, that is, except those motivated by the only true reason to want to know it: justice.

While the priest and other offenders may have stolen our bodies, it is the cardinals and bishops of the church, along with three successive popes before you, who have stolen our voices. Imagine our heartbreaking disappointment and despair if we discover that this includes you.

**Your first words must be to survivors and the children of the church**

We anticipate that some may criticize us for raising this issue while the world celebrates your election. However, when is it ever the right time to discuss the alarming reality of rape and

sexual violence against children, which occurs every minute of every hour of every day in this troubled world?

Shortly before Pope Francis died, he held a World Leaders Summit on Children's Rights<sup>1</sup> and signed a declaration outlining eight principles for the protection and care of children's rights. Following the summit, he announced his intention to issue a special apostolic exhortation directly addressed to children, aimed at educating and empowering them about their rights.

He never lived to complete this exhortation. Now that task falls upon you. The first words you speak as pope should be to survivors and the children of the church.

Yet how will you proclaim a commitment to upholding the rights of children around the world and denouncing those who do not, when under the church's laws, the vulnerable do not have those rights? Moreover, how can you do this while many of your fellow bishops are currently violating these very principles?

Pope Francis was urged repeatedly by the United Nations, by state-sponsored commissions on abuse, and by survivors like us to enact a truly universal zero tolerance law for sexual abuse and cover-up. No such church law exists. Why are tens of thousands of clerics, known by you and your fellow bishops around the world to have raped and sexually assaulted children and the vulnerable, still in ministry today? Why can any bishop in the world, including you, cover up instances of rape and transfer offenders to new assignments where they are likely to abuse again?

Without a new universal zero tolerance law, it is legal for known abusers to practice and present themselves as priests in good standing in parishes and schools, and to families. Current church laws do not protect and uphold the rights of children. They protect and uphold the immunity of bishops and clerics who abuse children, obstruct civil justice, and cover up sex crimes.

### **What true universal zero tolerance must be under your papacy**

We write to you with a spirit of prophetic anger, frustration, love, and a call for justice. Taking on the role of a prophet—urging the leader of the Catholic Church to adhere to his own words and commitments—is an unwelcome and thankless task. However, the priests, religious, nuns, lay ministers, and volunteers who have abused us, the bishops who have covered it up, and the popes ultimately responsible for these actions have forced us into this position. We are determined to remain faithful to the mission entrusted to us by the children of the church.

St. Francis of Assisi said, "Start by doing what is necessary, then do what is possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible."

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<sup>1</sup> "Speech of His Holiness Pope Francis to the World Leaders Participating in the Summit on Children's Rights." Dicastero per la Comunicazione, February 3, 2025.  
[vatican.va/content/francesco/speeches/2025/february/documents/20250203-summit-diritti-bambini.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/speeches/2025/february/documents/20250203-summit-diritti-bambini.html).

We have carefully and meticulously drafted, word-by-word and line-by-line, the first truly universal zero-tolerance law that meets the requirements and standards of both canon law and international human rights law.<sup>2</sup> This law is necessary. It will make it possible to legally and swiftly remove known offender priests from ministry worldwide and start holding bishops accountable for their actions. By doing this, we can achieve what seems impossible: creating a church where no one who harms children and the vulnerable can serve as a priest and where no one who covers up for fellow clerics will ever again be a bishop or sit on the chair of St. Peter.

St. Francis also famously remarked, “Your actions are the only sermon people need to hear.” Signing zero tolerance into church law and enacting it as pope will be the only exhortation the children of the world will ever need to hear from you.

### **Transition to an abuse-free church**

We are building a clear, pragmatic, and achievable process with the help of the international community to resolve this catastrophe, but it can only be achieved if you participate with us in a global, survivor-led transitional justice process to finally address the church’s legacy of sexual abuse and cover-up.

The model requires full Vatican participation, including truth-telling, restitution, and reform, but must not be controlled by the church. It offers a pathway to a post-abuse church grounded in transparency, justice, and healing.

This model must adhere to established core principles of justice internationally recognized by survivors, the United Nations, and international human rights bodies and organizations, especially in the context of addressing systematic and widespread human rights violations. It should be the responsibility of survivors to lead this process on the basis of their experience as victims of these violations. For genuine reconciliation to occur, church leaders must first demonstrate, accept, and proclaim the truth of their complicity in these crimes and violations. For this reason, the Holy See cannot control the process but must fully cooperate with an external body in good faith. Finally, the components of this model must be applied universally to the entire global church:

- A Global Truth Commission, independent and with full Vatican cooperation. It will hold regional hearings, document abuse and cover-up, and require full Vatican compliance, including opening of all archives of abuse records.
- A universal Zero Tolerance Law enacted into canon law, removing all abusers and complicit officials.
- Proactively partake in international agreements requiring church transparency and support for legal prosecutions. Concordats should include mandatory reporting obligations.

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<sup>2</sup> “SNAP Zero Tolerance Recommendations.” Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests. [natesmission.org/s/SNAP-ZT-LAW.pdf](https://natesmission.org/s/SNAP-ZT-LAW.pdf)

- A Reparations Fund supported by church assets to provide just restitution to survivors. This includes psychological care, financial restitution, education, and housing. Public acts of restitution should include memorials and official church acknowledgments.
- Form a Global Survivors Council with authority to monitor implementation and compliance. This Council will require the cooperation and participation of the Holy See, bishops' conferences, and international legal bodies.

Unless you join us in taking these steps, all efforts to address the catastrophe of clergy abuse will result in the same repetition of failure, another generation of clerical predators, and the continuation of this global trauma.

### **Three popes, three betrayals: Will you be the fourth?**

After the resurrection, Jesus told Peter: “When you were young, you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” (John 21:18)

Unlike you and Peter, many of us did not experience the freedom of youth. As children, we were not allowed to dress ourselves or go where we wished. Instead, we were led to places of total subjugation, destitution, and despair—a place where we felt the absence of God, much like what Christ experienced on the cross.

Now, you carry the weight of this burden. The abuse of children by certain priests and the subsequent cover-up of those crimes by bishops directly implicate you. This history forces you to confront the betrayal of innocence, leading you to a place you do not want to go.

As the Bishop of Rome, you are the direct successor of St. Peter, whom you believe was the first pope—chosen not by men, but by Christ himself. Yet, one of the great mysteries of faith is that Jesus did not choose Peter for his courage or honesty; he knew that Peter would betray him. Jesus was aware that Peter would deny his innocence and lie about it—not once, but three times. In other words, our first pope was a coward and a liar.

You will be the fourth successive pope since the public revelation of widespread and systematic abuse of children to Catholics and the world. Your three predecessors accepted the papal office, fully aware that they had betrayed the innocence of children in the dioceses entrusted to them. When they became pope, none declined the office out of shame or unworthiness for what had occurred—neither Karol Józef Wojtyła in Poland, nor Joseph Alois Ratzinger from Germany, nor your predecessor, Jorge Mario Bergoglio from Argentina. And none of them approached the papal chair and, like Peter, confessed his sins, wept bitterly, and vowed never to betray the innocent again. Like them, will you fail to fully recognize what you and your fellow bishops have done and what you are continuing to do?

Jesus reserved some of his strongest rebukes for Peter, saying, “Get behind me, Satan!” when Peter failed to grasp the true cost of discipleship. Yet, despite his shortcomings, Peter was still the one Christ entrusted with leading the church.

Betrayal of the innocent is not, in itself, a barrier to sitting on the Chair of St. Peter—as long as one follows Peter's example. Peter did not justify his actions. He did not excuse himself. He did not shield himself from the devastating realization of what he had done.

Will the children and the vulnerable of his church have to endure a fourth pope that will betray them and all the innocent entrusted to his care? Or will you be the first pope to end this scourge and heal the open wounds left by the Catholic Church's long history of sexual violence?

Sincerely,

The Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests

*(SNAP, the Survivors Network, has been providing support for victims of sexual abuse in institutional settings for more than 35 years. We have more than 25,000 survivors and supporters in our network. Our website is [SNAPnetwork.org](http://SNAPnetwork.org))*