

# Pope calls for unity among U.S. bishops in dealing with abuse crisis

Pope Francis has written to the bishops of the United States calling for a “change of mindset” to restore the Church’s credibility and trust among the faithful.

“Clearly a living fabric has come undone, and we, like weavers, are called to repair it,” the pope wrote in a letter to the American bishops, dated Jan 1 and released Jan. 3 by the U.S. bishops’ conference.

This repair process must involve a “change of mindset” by bishops in relation to prayer, power, exercising authority, and handling money, he explained, with the change rooted in an acknowledgment of the “sinfulness and limitations” which necessitate God’s grace.

The letter was sent ahead of the U.S. bishops’ weeklong retreat at Mundelein Seminary, in the Archdiocese of Chicago. The retreat was proposed by the pope in October as an opportunity for them to reflect and pray after a year of scandals which have rocked the Church in the U.S. and worldwide.

Following months of scandals, including the allegations against former cardinal Theodore McCarrick and the release of the Pennsylvania grand jury report, American bishops met in November for their annual general assembly in Baltimore, at which bishops vocally disagreed with one another on the root causes of the crisis facing the Church, and on the best means of addressing it.

Acknowledging that recent abuse scandals have undercut the credibility of the Church in the United States, Pope Francis said that a cover-up mentality “enabled them to fester and cause even greater harm to the network of relationships that today we are called to heal and restore.”

A unified body of bishops, he said, would be helpful in regaining this credibility.

“Credibility will be the fruit of a united body, that, while acknowledging its sinfulness and limitations, is at the same time capable of preaching the need for conversion,” he said.

Francis also condemned what he called a sense of “division and dispersion” among the communion of bishops that has erupted in the wake of abuse allegations. This discord, the pope said, goes beyond the typical disagreements bound to arise among any group of people and comes from “the enemy of human nature” taking advantage of current crises to further divide the Church.

The bishops must take a “renewed and decisive approach to resolving conflicts,”

said Francis, as he cautioned against a reliance on structural solutions that would reduce the role of a bishop to “a mere administrative or organizational function” in the “business of evangelization.”

The paramount task facing the American bishops, Francis said, is to create “a shared spirit of discernment” leading to true communion, without giving in to the “relative calm” of a sterile compromise or a vote with winners and losers.

The pope said that the bishops must abandon the “modus operandi of disparaging, discrediting, playing the victim or the scold in our relationships,” and instead should focus their attention on “the gentle breeze that the Gospel alone can offer.”

Instead, he said, the bishops should work to avoid “gossip and slander” and promote dialogue, discussion and discernment among one another.

“As a Church we cannot be held hostage by this side or that, but must be attentive always to start from those who are most vulnerable.”

In his letter, Francis expressed regret that he was not able to personally attend the retreat, but that he still wished to “reflect with [the American bishops] on some aspects I consider important,” and to offer encouragement for their “prayer and the steps (they) are taking to combat the ‘culture of abuse’ and to deal with the crisis of credibility.”

The pope warned that while many responses were being considered by the bishops, they must be cautious to avoid those that do not necessarily align with the “flavour” of the Gospel.

“To put it colloquially,” said the pontiff, “we have to be careful that ‘the cure does not become worse than the disease.’”

For this to be accomplished, he said that the bishops must engage in “wisdom, prayer, much listening, and fraternal communion.”