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## LETTER TO THE ORDER OF SAINT AUGUSTINE REGARDING THE PREVENTION OF ABUSE AND THE PROTECTION OF MINORS

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The theme of the abuse of minors is an enormous tragedy and a tremendous scandal. It is even more tragic when it occurs within the Church. These actions confront us and hurt us deeply, while asking for courageous answers. Abuse calls for the demand of justice. Recently I participated in the meeting: "The protection of minors in the Church", which took place in the Vatican on February 21-24, 2019. The presidents of the Episcopal Conferences of the whole world, the representatives of the Roman Curia and members of the executive councils of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) and of the Union of Superiors General (USG), were invited to participate. They were intense and hard days as we listened, reflected, talked and prayed. Without a doubt, all of us participated in a deep and painful experience, which we assumed with a great sense of responsibility. That is why I want to send you some thoughts that we, as a General Council, consider to be of great importance for the Order. I ask all of you, and each one of you, to reflect prayerfully on this theme.

### **1. The abuse of minors: a sin which cries to the heavens.**

The Order of Saint Augustine wants to express its support for the steps made especially by Popes Benedict XVI and Francis. We wish always to live in communion with the Church in such a way that all of us work together to banish this abominable sin. It is not an alien or circumstantial problem, which does not or will not affect us. Thinking like that is a falsehood and a huge mistake. We need a much more proactive and transparent attitude. A greater collaboration is also essential. Only then will we become truly effective in prevention, in management and in helping those in need.

The sexual abuse of children and vulnerable people falls within a framework of horror and moves us in the depths of our humanity. We do not speak only of singular cases, but of a structural sin, of having allowed, as an institution, the proliferation of evil without stopping it, and at times even concealing it. I would like us, as the members of the Order of Saint Augustine, to commit ourselves to work decisively to defend the lives of the vulnerable in the face of unscrupulous abusers who take away their dignity. There cannot be silence or inhibition; we cannot look the other way or minimize the problem; there is no place for inhumanity. Let us put aside apathy and selfishness. We must act, and act now. "The Lord said to Cain: *Where is your brother?* Cain replied: *I do not know; Am I my brother's keeper?* The Lord replied: *What have you done? Your brother's blood is screaming to me from the ground.*" (Gen 4,9-10). Yes. Let each of us answer the questions: Where is your brother or sister? What did you do? How did you defend him or her? In what way did you protect him or her? What was your response? The cry of the weak, used, and abused continues to cry out to heaven, and it resounds in our ears and in our soul.

### **2. The abuse of power.**

Sexual abuse of vulnerable people is an abuse of power. Especially when committed by those who have authority: bishops, priests and religious men and women. The saddest thing is that this is a long story, which has been going on for decades. A story of passion and the cross for those who suffered this abuse. Through tears and pain, we bow our heads when we see this abuse caused by those among us and in our

Church. Such atrocities have been committed and hidden, without listening, at times, to the weak and vulnerable people whose life became a type of hell. False justifications nor defensive attitudes are valid.

We must open ourselves to conversion, seeking an authenticity of life and addressing the causes: the culture of clericalism and careerism; a false corporate sense; the loss of religious values; preferring the mundane to the holy. To this is added a sexuality that is often not integrated nor properly formed. We must be humble enough to convert and change. We must commit ourselves to walk alongside those we serve, with transparency, trust, honesty and consistency. We must denounce arrogance, a lack of scruples, and the feeling of impunity. In asking ourselves "why", we must see the trace of sin, the rejection of God, the falseness of arid and loveless lives, destined to destruction. They are the consequences of a pseudo-culture in which it seems that anything goes, and everything is allowed to satisfy the lowest instincts; even at the price of ruining and degrading a child's existence. "Whoever scandalizes one of these little ones, it would be better for him to have a millstone tied around his neck and be thrown into the sea" (Lk 17,2).

The abuse of power has been the way that, at times, these issues have been managed. The important thing was to avoid being known, to maintain a good appearance. The guilty was transferred, and the crime was hidden. This is a tragic game of deceit in a world of shadows. The sin of omission has been enormous. Certainly, the Church, and also society, must strive to create a different culture, we could even say a new one. We need to promote a culture where children and young people are valued, considering them as treasures that must be safeguarded and respected.

### **3. A responsibility for all**

In the event of an accusation, it is necessary to carry out a serious investigation, both in the religious and civil sectors (especially where civil law requires a denunciation). We, however, should not judge or condemn anyone before this investigation is carried out. The tendency to criticize others is frequent. But this can also become an injustice when there is no certainty that the facts have happened. Added to this, there are people responsible for these acts who have been victims before and this further complicates the possibility of judging.

Only from the awareness of sin, "with a broken and humbled heart" (Ps 51,19), can we ask for true forgiveness. The facts are very serious, and we cannot minimize them or ignore them by taking refuge in presumed anti-clerical campaigns, or as if everything were an attack by the media. The media are not our enemies, but they can help us to undertake the difficult mission of safeguarding and protecting minors and the most vulnerable people in society. It is, without a doubt, a positive thing that with their insistent denunciation of the abuses, they have unmasked so many crimes. I ask the media, however, to be critical and evaluate everything fairly, without being driven by ideological criteria. Generalizations and sectarianism are not valid. We must all always look for the good of people and society, without being moved by other motives.

In this sense, I would also like to refer to a certainly complex topic. We know that there are some professionals who offer their help with the objective of obtaining economic gains. They do not really care about the victims. They simply look for benefits. And they even denounce innocent people, whose lives are irretrievably damaged. I know that it is not a simple subject and that is why I make a call to sanity, sincerity and transparency. There are complaints that are not true and people can be destroyed.

We must all fight against abuse. The percentage of abusers who are ministers in the Catholic Church is statistically small compared to the large number belonging to other areas, such as families, sports associations, etc. This does not justify us in any way. In any case, the gravity is greater when directly contradicting the essence of the Christian message and the reality of the consecrated persons, and their moral authority. But it must make us see that the subject of abuse is not confined to the Catholic Church, but is, unfortunately, much broader. We would like the Church to lead this struggle. The fight

must be against all abuse of minors and vulnerable people, many of which are not reported. May it be a focus of prophetic denunciation, of healing and of hope.

#### 4. Some practical questions for the Order of Saint Augustine

We must become aware and truly live out our ecclesial vocation of communion and our religious vocation. The Pauline image of the Church understood as the family of God is beautiful and very significant (cf Eph 2,19), in which charity is an intrinsic consequence. The Augustinians are united in community to have a single soul and a single heart on the way to God (see Rule 3). Let us always bear in mind this fundamental objective, which requires us to take care of one's own house and of one's own members. Therefore, thinking about our Order, I want to highlight some aspects in a special way.

1. *Strengthen community life, essential in our Augustinian charism.* For this our communities must have a sufficient number of brothers. The proliferation of communities of three members (even two) has a real danger of leading to loneliness and individualism. What should be an exception is becoming the norm in many places. I ask the Major Superiors to take the necessary measures so that our communities have a minimum of 4-5 members. Only in exceptional cases could communities of 3 members be admitted and in no case of 2. Maybe we should restructure our presences, but it will have been worth it.

2. *Draft protocols.* All the circumscriptions of the Order must have an action protocol for cases of abuse to vulnerable people. Heads of our parishes, schools and other activities should be made aware of these protocols. The Major Superiors are responsible for their approval and distribution. We have recently requested that a copy of these protocols be sent to the General Secretariat of the Order.

3. *Integrate the protection of minors and vulnerable adults into our formation programs,* ensuring that at each stage adequate instruction and education is provided to both formators and *formandi*. We must be attentive to the selection of candidates for consecrated life by using objective and clear criteria. It is also essential to take care of the specifically affective and sexual formation of our candidates in all the formative stages.

4. *Pay attention to the victims as a priority.* We must develop special programs to accompany all people. Some abused by members of the Church no longer have trust and move away not only from us, priests and religious, but also from the Church. They show rejection and bitterness, and sometimes also aggressiveness. This is logical and understandable. However, it is vital to prepare the proper channels for all victims who seek spiritual help favoring healing and personal growth, from the mercy and experience of God's love. Those who have been abused often endure a sense of guilt and even sin, when in reality they have been sinned against. They are not guilty, but victims. We must never forget this.

5. *Support and pray for each other.* To those who have lived faithfully your commitments in the Augustinian religious life, I want to thank you for your fidelity and I pray for you and I encourage you not to lose hope. During a moment of great scandal in the North African Church of the fifth century, St. Augustine preached a word of hope to those who felt guilty simply because they were part of the Church. In commenting on Psalm 30, he preached: "*I have become a source of fear to my acquaintances.* What can be more frightening to one who sees others leading bad lives, than to find that even those for whom he had high hopes are also guilty of many bad deeds? Such a person is afraid that everyone who was considered good may after all be no better than the rest, and the result is that nearly all good people fall under suspicion. "What a fine fellow that man was! Then how comes it that he has fallen? How did it happen that he could be found out in that base dealing, that crime, that disgraceful business? Perhaps everyone is like that?" This is what *a source of fear to my acquaintances* implies, this is how we often come to be doubted even by those who know us well." Although we all shamefully feel the sins and crimes of only one person, I beg you to continue being strong, brothers and sisters. I am grateful to God for your faithful commitment and I pray for your perseverance and courage in these difficult times.

6. *Count on the assistance of the laity.* In the fight against abuse we need above all the help of parents. They have an instinct for the protection of children. In this sense I want to emphasize the role and mission of mothers. If we had asked for help and assistance from parents, more energetic, quick and effective measures would have been taken. This could have avoided much pain for victims and their families. I also think it is essential to create consultation and research teams, in both cases, with the participation of lay people.

The Major Superiors should work toward the realization and development of these points.

## 5. A new period.

The journey begins by assuming our own responsibility and searching for the necessary means to live radically the vocation to which we have been called. Abuse indicates a failure, a falsification of one's own life. It is a sin, without a doubt, that springs from incoherence and the loss of a sense of being religious.

Before concluding, it is fitting that we join with those who have suffered and painfully suffer from our disabilities and deceptions, those who have found closed doors and mercy reduced to a theory. It is really difficult to send a message to these people who are survivors of abuse. I do it with humility, seeking the strength that Christ gives us. The healing force of true love: Dear brothers and sisters, victims of abuse: with all my heart I tell you that we Augustinians wish to be more sensitive to your tremendous pain; that we will do everything possible to listen better to you who have been victims, humbly acknowledging that we have not always listened as we should; that we commit ourselves to do everything in our power to respond effectively and forcefully to this shame, to this sin; and that we assume the responsibility that belongs to us as we strive to eradicate this evil. For this we need your help. We want to work together, to learn from you and with you.

I make my own the words of Pope Francis, delivered in his address on February 24, in the Sala Regia, under the loving gaze of our Mother of Good Counsel, at the end of the concluding eucharistic concelebration of the meeting: "Here again I would state clearly: if in the Church there should emerge even a single case of abuse – which already in itself represents an atrocity – that case will be faced with the utmost seriousness. Brothers and Sisters: in people's justified anger, the Church sees the reflection of the wrath of God, betrayed and insulted by these deceitful consecrated persons. The echo of the silent cry of the little ones who, instead of finding in them fathers and spiritual guides encountered tormentors, will shake hearts dulled by hypocrisy and by power. It is our duty to pay close heed to this silent, choked cry.... The best results and the most effective resolution that we can offer to the victims, to the People of Holy Mother Church and to the entire world, are the commitment to personal and collective conversion, the humility of learning, listening, assisting and protecting the most vulnerable."

May our Mother of Good Counsel protect us and accompany us always.

Rome, March 14, 2019

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