

Polish Archbishop Stirs Anger With Child Sex-Abuse Comments

Poland's most senior Catholic cleric said children with divorced parents were sometimes more vulnerable to sexual abuse by priests, remarks that prompted a storm of outrage though the church later said it was a slip of the tongue.

The comments from Archbishop Józef Michalik entrenched the view among some younger Poles that the church is out of touch with modern society and failing to properly confront allegations of sexual abuse by priests.

In comments shown on Tuesday by broadcaster TVN24, Michalik said child sexual abuse by priests was unacceptable, but the debate about it needed to be broadened out beyond the immediate physical or psychological wounds inflicted on the victims.

"And one has to say ... how many wounds are inflicted when parents divorce? We often hear that this inappropriate attitude [pedophilia], or abuse, manifests itself when a child is seeking love," said the clergyman, who is head of the Roman Catholic episcopate in Poland.

"It [the child] clings, it searches. It gets lost itself and then draws another person into this."

After the comments were broadcast, Polish social media networks reverberated with angry comments.

"This is disgusting, and is soaked in a sick logic, when a victim is responsible for a crime," wrote one person, who gave her name as Anna, posting on Facebook.

Another poster on the site, who identified himself as Adam, wrote: "While reading this, we can only be happy that this

‘Polish institution’ has committed ritual suicide.”

Church authorities later on Tuesday convened a news conference to try to calm the outrage. A spokesman for the episcopate said the archbishop’s comments had been a “a pure slip of the tongue” and the archbishop has been misunderstood.

Michalik himself, who was present at the news conference, apologized for the situation. “The context of my comment was as follows: A child is always innocent. But it can be hurt not only by priests but also by its own environment,” he said.

Poland is one of Europe’s most devoutly Catholic countries. The church’s role at the center of public life was cemented when clergymen, led by Polish-born Pope John Paul II, helped bring down Communist rule in the late 1980s.

That role is now being challenged by a generation of Poles who feel uncomfortable with the church’s traditional views on issues such as abortion, divorce and same-sex partnerships.

While the Catholic Church in countries such as Ireland and the United States has taken steps to be more assertive about uncovering child sex abuse by priests, in Poland it remains largely a taboo subject.

Abuse allegations are reported from time to time in the Polish media, but there has so far been no far-reaching public debate about the issue.

Pope Francis said soon after he was elected as Roman Catholic pontiff this year that he wanted to act decisively to root out sexual abuse of children by priests and ensure the perpetrators are punished.

Editing by Christian Lowe/Mark Heinrich

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