

UN Committee on Torture Grills Vatican on Sexual Abuse

A U.N. committee on torture grilled the Vatican on the Catholic Church's child sexual abuse crisis on Monday, urging a permanent investigation system to end a "climate of impunity" prevailing for decades.

In a two-hour hearing in Geneva, the Committee Against Torture launched a barrage of questions to the Vatican delegation, asking about past policy decisions, the juridical distinction between the Holy See and Vatican City, and information on specific cases.

The Vatican, which will issue its formal answers on Tuesday, said the Church has been "doing its own house cleaning" for 10 years, was determined to protect children and that measures put in place have led to a decline in cases of sexual abuse of children by priests.

George Tugushi, a committee member from Georgia, said a recently formed international commission advising Pope Francis on how to deal with **sexual abuse**, was a very positive step but not enough.

"The commission may need help to ensure all cases are reported properly and begin to change the climate of impunity but it cannot be considered in our opinion as a substitute for a functioning investigation system," he told the **Vatican** delegation headed by Archbishop Silvano Tomasi.

Another committee member, Satyabhoosun Gupt Domah of Mauritius, asked if the Holy See was taking steps to eliminate the "chemistry that creates the conditions" for sexual abuse of children by priests.

The Holy See's position is its adherence to the U.N. Convention Against Torture applies only to the territory of Vatican City. Tomasi said while the Holy See can be a moral force, the "agent of justice" for crimes committed by Catholics was the local state where the crime was committed.

"It should be stressed, particularly in light of much confusion, that the Holy See has no jurisdiction ... over every member of the **Catholic Church**," he said in opening remarks.

Splitting Hairs?

Barbara Blaine of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP) accused the Vatican of ducking responsibility. "They are splitting hairs when they should be embracing the victims and stopping the sexual violence," she said.

The committee's chief rapporteur, Felice Gaer of the United States, told the Vatican delegation that its position "seems to reflect an intention for a significant portion of the actions and omissions of Holy See officials be excluded from consideration by this committee, and this troubles us."

Gaer and Tugushi presented dozens of questions to the delegation, asking them to respond to reports presented to the committee by non-government organizations.

"We have received numerous allegations of intimidation of witnesses and shifting of finances to avoid payment (of compensation)," she said.

Tomasi told Reuters Television that the reduction in the number of cases of abuse showed that "effective" action taken by the Church was working.

"I think that in this kind of situation there will never be enough done. The damage has been done, reparation has to continue," he said.

The Church in the United States had invested \$2.5 billion in

compensation for the victims and that “most of the abuser priests that we know of have been defrocked,” he said.

Church groups defended the Catholic Church’s efforts to stem abuse and criticized committee members who said the Church’s opposition to abortion had harmed women.

“Attacking the Church’s moral and religious beliefs violates the religious liberty of the Church, a human right which the United Nations affirms,” said Ashley McGuire of Catholic Voices.

“Over the last decade, the Church has put into place reforms and protocols so strong that they are now being modeled by other institutions, like public schools ...,” she said.

Last February, a U.N. committee on the rights of the child accused the Vatican of systematically turning a blind eye to decades of abuse and attempting to cover up sex crimes. The Vatican called the report unfair and ideologically slanted.

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