

Vatican Pushed to Reveal Scope of Child Sexual Abuse

United Nations child protection experts grilled Vatican delegates on Thursday on how **Roman Catholic** officials handled the decades-long sexual abuse of minors by priests that Pope Francis called “the shame of the Church.”

The officials, called to account for the first time since the Holy See signed the U.N. children’s rights charter in 1990, argued that the Church recognized the problem and had drawn up clear guidelines to protect children from predator priests.

But members of the U.N. Committee on the Rights of the Child and abuse victims attending the session in Geneva demanded far more transparency on a scandal that has hounded the Church for more than two decades in countries from Ireland to Australia.

“The view of committee is that the best way to prevent abuses is to reveal old ones—openness instead of sweeping offenses under the carpet,” Kirsten Sandberg, chairwoman of the 18-strong U.N. committee, told the **Vatican** delegation.

“It seems to date your procedures are not very transparent.”

Barbara Blaine, president of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests (SNAP), which has 15,000 U.S. members and 4,000 foreign members since being launched 25 years ago, said the Vatican response fell far short of what victims wanted.

“What we want to see is the Vatican punish bishops who covered up sex crimes and we want them to turn over information they have about crimes to police,” she said.

Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, head of the Vatican delegation, said in his opening remarks the Church had set clear procedures “designed to help eliminate such abuse and to

collaborate with respective state authorities to fight this crime.”

Committee expert Sara De Jesus Oviedo Fierro contested this view, saying the Holy See had “not established any mechanism to investigate perpetrators of sexual abuse and to prosecute them.”

Holy See ‘Gets It’

Pope Francis told worshippers at morning Mass in the Vatican on Thursday that abuse scandals had “cost us a lot of money, but (paying damages) is only right.” He said bishops, priests and lay people were responsible for this “shame of the Church.”

Victims accuse bishops of covering up crimes and switching priests to other parishes to avoid prosecution. Courts have ordered dioceses to pay hundreds of millions of dollars in damages, bankrupting a string of them in the United States.

On Dec. 5, **Pope Francis** ordered the formation of a team of experts to look into the sexual abuse of minors in the Church, in his first major step to tackle the crisis.

Archbishop Charles Scicluna, formerly the top Vatican official for abuse cases, rejected charges of any cover-up.

“The Holy See gets it, let’s not say too late. ... There are certainly things that need to be done differently,” he said.

“It is not the policy of the Holy See to encourage cover-ups. Only the truth will help us move on to a situation where we can start being an example of best practice.”

Scicluna said the Vatican had opened investigations into 612 new cases of sexual abuse by clerics in 2012, of which 465 were “more serious” and 418 concerned minors.

“It sounds like they are pulling numbers out of thin air because they are on the hot seat. What about the victims?”

Blaine, an American raped as a child in Ohio, told Reuters.

Miguel Hurtado, a Spaniard abused by his parish priest, also voiced disappointment at the Vatican's statements.

"Transparency is a very powerful tool when you are doing the right thing. When you have something to hide, you hide behind words and are not forthcoming with facts and details because facts and details are not on your side," he told Reuters TV.

Additional reporting by Philip Pullella in Rome; Editing by Tom Heneghan and Gareth Jones

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