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Francis must act faster on abuse issue

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Editorial

The U.N. Committee on the Rights of the Child issued a report in early February that chastised the Vatican for substandard policies that fall short in protecting children, specifically from sexual abuse.

The condemnation came from a committee of 18 independent experts who monitor the implementation of the 1989 U.N. treaty -- ratified by the Holy See in 1990 -- related to child protection and children's rights. Among the committee's chief criticisms are that the Vatican "has not acknowledged the extent of the crimes committed," that its systems and procedures are shrouded in secrecy that shields the abusers and denies justice to victims, and that the church's global network has been used to hide perpetrators and obstruct investigations.

Critics have faulted the U.N. report for not keeping its focus on the sexual abuse of minors and instead also criticizing Vatican policies (we would call them teachings) on abortion, birth control, homosexuality and even corporal punishment. Bringing up these issues -- which the committee may not have been able to avoid because of its wider mandate -- made the report too easy to dismiss by the very people it should have roused to action. It also focused too much on the historical record and ignored some recent progress the Vatican has made. Because of this, the report comes off as dated, giving critics more ammunition to dismiss it. A more politically savvy report could have had greater impact. Commentators even on the *NCR* website called the report poorly done, sloppily executed and an opportunity squandered.

While acknowledging these weaknesses, we should not lose sight of the truth the report contains: When it comes to sex abuse, church officials continue to cloak themselves in secrecy, deceive the faithful and act with impunity.

A year ago, abuse survivors finally prevailed in a long-drawn-out battle with the Los Angeles archdiocese, and thousands of pages of documents were made public that clearly showed that Cardinal Roger Mahony, retired archbishop of Los Angeles, and his lieutenants had shielded abusive priests from public scrutiny and possibly law enforcement. The current archbishop, José Gomez, publicly rebuked his predecessor and tried mightily to restrict Mahony's public duties. Mahony, however, proved that even a retired cardinal outranks a sitting archbishop and Gomez was forced to stand down. Mahony plowed through a blizzard of public criticism to make his way to the conclave that would elect Pope Francis. No one, apparently, has the authority to stop a cardinal from doing whatever he wants. On Feb. 18 this year, Mahony sent this Tweet: "In Rome for meetings of Cardinals & Pope Francis. Holy Spirit, pour out wisdom upon us all that we might follow Jesus more closely!" That's a rather audacious prayer for someone who spent years manipulating the legal system in an attempt to conceal the truth.

In Los Angeles on Feb. 19, as this issue goes to press, a $13 million settlement between sex abuse survivors and the Los Angeles archdiocese was announced. Most are cases against Fr. Nicolas Aguilar-Rivera, a Mexican priest who left his home diocese in 1987 for "health reasons" and over 10 months in Los Angeles' immigrant community molested two dozen boys. Warned by the chancery of a police investigation, Aguilar-Rivera fled and is still at large. Since 2002, Los Angeles has paid out $740 million on abuse settlements and unknown

amounts on legal fees.

In Minneapolis on Feb. 19, we learn from Minnesota Public Radio that despite reporting publicly for a decade that the St. Paul-Minneapolis archdiocese's list of "credibly accused priests" numbered 33, the list should probably number 70. The archdiocese itself added nine names Feb. 17 when it learned that MPR was reviewing court records, private settlements, police reports and hundreds of internal church documents. MPR reports: "There were handwritten lists and emailed lists and memos about lists stored on computers and in filing cabinets at the chancery in St. Paul. Some men appeared on every list, others on one or two. All of the lists obtained by MPR News contain information that police have never seen. Chancery officials later stopped writing lists for fear they could be obtained in lawsuits, former chancellor for canonical affairs Jennifer Haselberger told MPR News."

Church officials will protest that this is history, that most of these cases go back decades, before they knew how serious this issue was.

In Chicago on Feb. 19, news broke that three men filed lawsuits alleging they had been abused between 2000 and 2005 by former priest Daniel McCormack, whom Cardinal Francis George allowed to stay in ministry until his second arrest for abuse (**see story** **[1]**). George, who was installed in Chicago in 1997, has largely blamed McCormack's crimes on his predecessor.

In Kansas City, Mo., lay Catholics have petitioned the pope for a penal investigation into Bishop Robert Finn, who was convicted in 2012 of a criminal misdemeanor for failing to report suspected child abuse (**see story** **[2]**). Finn remains a bishop in good standing, while serving two years' probation in Jackson County, Mo., and in a plea deal in Clay County meets with the local prosecutor monthly. The laity say they stepped forward because priests in the diocese are afraid to speak publicly.

On Feb. 6, the Vatican, which had received reports from priests alleging that Bishop Cristian Contreras had sexually abused boys, announced it had opened an investigation into the Chilean bishop because Contreras, who denied the allegations, had "expressed the wish" that he be investigated. The Vatican had to get his permission to investigate?

The church as a whole and individual dioceses in particular have made tremendous progress in addressing the issue of clergy abusing minors. In many areas -- Kansas City is one of them now -- the local church has exemplary training programs in child protection for church staff and volunteers. Jeff Anderson, the dark knight nemesis to Catholic officials across the country, has praised the Chicago archdiocese's victim assistance program as one of the best in the nation. The church is doing many things right.

What it has not yet done is take steps to tell the full truth and to address the impunity of high church officials. On recommendation from his Council of Cardinals, the pope has announced he will appoint a special commission to advise him directly on best practices in handling sex abuse. To demonstrate resolve at the highest levels that zero tolerance is a permanent part of the church culture, the mandate of this new commission must also include establishing disciplinary procedures for bishops and chancery officials who obstruct or ignore the enforcement of church law on clergy sex abuse.

On some counts, the U.N. report may have been flawed, but in the essential matters of the clergy sex abuse crisis, the report was simply naming the truth that has been apparent to so many for a very long time.

In January, Francis announced that the commission will be housed in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, but the commission is yet to be officially constituted. We know Francis can act fast when he wants to. He must act faster on this issue.

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