Vatican



by Joshua J. McElwee

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

December 14, 2017
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

ROME -- A member of Pope Francis' commission on clergy sexual abuse has suggested that the pontiff may let the group lapse into an inactive state when the terms of office of its current membership expire Dec. 17.

Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner, a member of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, seemed* to suggest that on Twitter Dec. 13 in response to a Tweet by Marie Collins, an Irish abuse survivor who resigned from the commission in March.

Collins was commenting on news that suspended commission member Peter Saunders would be resigning from the group ahead of the Dec. 17 expiration of his term. In a Tweet, she said Saunders' move had "strange timing" due to the approaching end of his term.

Responding to Collins in his own Tweet, Zollner said a "new term" of the commission "will start in 2018."

"What happens between the end of the current members term 17th December and [the] new term starting at some date in 2018?" Collins asked back. "Does the Commission lie dormant?"

Zollner replied: "Education, formation and research continue, preparations for the first meeting of the future Commission members are on the way, the office is at work."

Collins again: "But surely if no members have been appointed then there is no Commission unless it is intended that the office take over the work of the members."

"We have sent in names for members, we'll need to wait until new membership is appointed," the Jesuit said, ending the conversation.

In response to a question about the meaning of his comments, Zollner told NCR: "Basically we wait for the pope's reply." The Jesuit, who is also the president of the Centre for Child Protection at the Pontifical Gregorian University, said he had to be brief in his response as he was in meetings throughout the day Dec. 14.

Asked if Zollner's comments meant that the commission would go into an inactive state Dec. 17 pending further appointments of members by Francis, a spokesperson for the commission's Vatican office responded: "The only response I can give is that we await the Holy Father’s decision regarding future membership."

"As soon as we have any news [we'll] be in contact to inform [the] press and the public," said Emer McCarthy, the commission's projects manager and media coordinator.

According to the Vatican's daily press notification of the pope's official meetings, Francis met with Boston Cardinal Seán O'Malley, the president of the commission, this morning, Dec. 14.

The papal commission has come under increasing public criticism since its creation by Francis in March 2014.

Collins resigned March 1, citing frustration with Vatican officials' reluctance to cooperate with its work to protect children. She cited particular dissatisfaction with one Vatican office's refusal to comply with a request from the commission, approved by the pope, that all letters sent to the Vatican by abuse survivors receive a response.

Advertisement

She also cited the commission's request, approved by the pope, that the Vatican create a new tribunal to judge bishops who act inappropriately in sexual abuse cases. While that tribunal was announced by O'Malley in June 2015, it was never created.

In place of the proposed tribunal, Francis signed a new universal law for the church in June 2016 specifying that a bishop's negligence in response to clergy sexual abuse can lead to his removal from office.

Francis created the papal commission on March 22, 2014, appointing eight members to the new entity. He added an additional nine members on Dec. 17, 2014. While the members were not initially appointed with a term limit, the commission's statutes, approved by the Vatican in April 2015, grant members renewable three-year term limits.

[Joshua J. McElwee is NCR Vatican correspondent. His email address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org. Follow him on Twitter: @joshjmac.]

**This sentence has been updated from the original version to correct a grammatical error.*

A version of this story appeared in the **Dec 29, 2017-Jan 11, 2018** print issue under the headline: Papal abuse commission appears to go inactive.