Vatican



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Pope Francis renewed the mandate of his clergy sexual abuse commission Feb. 17, two months after the group's lapse into an inactive state led some survivor advocates to question whether protecting children was being given the highest priority in the Catholic Church.

The pontiff reappointed eight of the previous members of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors and added nine new people to its ranks. Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley returns as the president of the group, and Boston priest Msgr. Robert Oliver returns as its secretary.

While none of the members of the commission are publicly known as abuse survivors, the group said in a statement that some of them are survivors who have yet to publicly identify themselves. The commission said it "believes that their privacy in this matter is to be respected."

Six former members of the commission were not reappointed by Francis, including some of the best known figures in the group, such as: French psychotherapist Catherine Bonnet, British Baroness Sheila Hollins, New Zealand church official Bill Kilgallon, and religious congregation advisor Krysten Winter-Green.

Marie Collins, an Irish abuse survivor who resigned from the commission in frustration last March, told NCR some of those not reappointed were among the group's most active members. She said three were leaders of the commission's six working groups.

"I'm shocked at the discarding of some of the most active and independent members of the commission," said Collins. "Some of those who have gone were really the most active and had the most experience of working in child protection and working directly with survivors."

The three-year mandate of commission members had lapsed Dec. 17.

Francis' appointment of new members to his advisory body comes as he is facing some of the heaviest criticism of his papacy over his handling of accusations against a Chilean bishop accused of covering up abuse while he has a priest in the 1980s and 90s.

After decrying the accusations as "calumny" last month, the pope made an about-face Jan. 30 and sent Maltese Archbishop Charles Scicluna, one of the church's most respected investigators of clergy abuse, to examine the survivors' claims.

Scicluna is to take testimony from one of Bishop Juan Barros' accusers later Feb. 17. He will meet in New York with abuse survivor Juan Carlos Cruz, who claims Barros witnessed his abuse by Fr. Fernando Karadima.

Bonnet told NCR she had decided to resign from the commission last June after two hopes she had for the group's work were not achieved. She said one hope was that survivors or advocate groups might be invited to a hearing hosted by the commission to bring their contribution to its work before or at its last plenary meeting in September 2017.

The other hope was that the commission would vote as a group to recommend that Francis declare that church leaders around the world be mandated to report suspicion of abuse to civil authorities, in order to "reduce the suffering of children so they do not have to wait years and years for abuse to be reported."

The other two members of the abuse commission not reappointed by Francis are Argentine Jesuit Fr. Humberto Yanez, director of the department of moral theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University; and Australian church official Kathleen McCormack.

The nine new members of the commission come from a diverse set of places, including: Ethiopia, India, Tonga, Brazil, Australia and the Netherlands. Among them is also Teresa Kettelkamp, a former executive director of the U.S. bishops' secretariat of child and youth protection and a former colonel in the Illinois State Police.

The commission said in its press statement that it hopes the new members will offer insights "reflecting the global reach of the Church and the challenge of creating safeguarding structures in diverse cultural contexts."

The group also said that its next plenary meeting, to be held in April, would begin with a meeting with some victims of sexual abuse. The statement added that "discussions have been underway" for creation of a new a separate advisory panel of individuals who have been abused.

The other eight new members of the abuse commission are:

- Benyam Mezmur, who teaches law at Ethiopia's Dullah Omar Institute;
- Religious of Jesus and Mary Sr. Arina Gonsalves, a vice provincial for her order in India;
- Neville Owen, a former senior judge of the Court of Appeal of the Supreme Court of Western Australia;
- Sinaelelea Fe'ao, coordinator of religious education for the Tonga and Niue diocese;
- Myriam Wijlens, a canon law professor at the University of Erfurt in Germany;
- Ernesto Caffo, a professor of child and adolescent psychiatry at Italy's University of Modena and Reggio Emilia;
- Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood Sr. Jane Bertelsen, her order's congregational leader; and,
- Nelson Giovanelli, founder of a Brazilian drug rehabilitation center.

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

Collins resigned March 1, 2017, 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.

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. It has not been clear since how the processes outlined in that law are being enforced or followed.

Now former commission member Winter-Green said in an interview last August that one problem facing the group was that it is understaffed and overworked.

"We have a horrendous job and a very slim budget," she said then, calling a "lack of transparent information regarding budgetary resources" a "major challenge."

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