News



Jonathan Luxmoore

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The Dutch bishops' conference said it had worked to prevent further sexual abuse by Catholic clergy, but said a recent report by a leading newspaper was "old news."

"The time for praying and apologizing is clearly over; we're in a new phase of firmer commitment to prevent all abuse," said Daphne De Roosendaal, conference spokeswoman.

"But while many people know how much the bishops have done, some media reports still give the impression cases from decades ago have only just occurred."

A Sept. 14 story in the NRC Handelsblad daily accused more than half of Dutch bishops of complicity in sexual abuse.

The following day, the bishops' conference said "much of the information" provided by NRC Handelsblad had been "public knowledge" since 2011.

It added that "insufficient care" had been taken by some bishops who knowingly or unknowingly reappointed abusing priests, but said measures to prevent and fight abuse had since been enforced by the Dutch church, including a "very strict code of conduct," revised in April, and "an ever-stricter obligation" to suspicions immediately to police.

De Roosendaal told Catholic News Service Sept. 21 the newspaper had done its story "as a service to the people of Holland" after a mid-August grand jury report on clerical abuse in Pennsylvania. However, she added that the story had drawn its material from previous church-commissioned reports, mostly listing "well-known cases" that had been investigated.

"Since 2010, the church has initiated large-scale investigations, as well as a contact point for people to file complaints, arrange mediation and seek financial compensation," De Roosendaal said.

"Although people have been shocked by these latest stories, leaving victims and survivors in pain again, they mostly cover old news. Everything is now in place to ensure sexual abuse no longer happens anywhere in our church."

Claims of sexual abuse by Dutch clergy surfaced in the 1990s, when the bishops' conference set up Hulp und Recht [Help and Law] to help alleged victims.

Later, more than 2,000 filed abuse complaints were filed with an independent church-requested commission, set up in 2010 under Wim Deetman, former education minister.

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This summer, a report by a separate church-commissioned reporting center on sexual abuse detailed subsequent investigations and put total agreed compensation by the end of 2017 at almost 28 million euros (US$33 million).

The report said the center's board had been "generally positive" about the church's cooperation with investigations, with some church authorities adopting an

"extremely praiseworthy" attitude. It added that some church representatives initially reacted with "incredulity or an unwillingness or inability to believe the charges."

In its story, NRC Handelsblad said 20 of the Dutch church's 39 bishops serving from 1945 to 2010 -- including six still living -- had been implicated in covering up abuse, with four auxiliaries suspected of personally molesting minors.

It added that one female victim, now 62, had received no response to complaints, despite hand-delivering a letter to the Vatican, and said some abusing clergy had been repeatedly transferred to other dioceses "to continue with a clean slate."

On Sept. 19, Auxiliary Bishop Robertus Mutsaerts of 'S-Hertogenbosch said he was withdrawing as a delegate to the Oct. 3-28 Synod of Bishops on young people, the faith and vocational discernment. He said he felt it was not the right time for the discussion because of "current rampant abuse scandals."

Around 16 percent of the 16 million inhabitants of the Netherlands are Catholic, according to 2010 National Statistics Office figures. Participation has declined sharply in the country, which was Europe's first to legalize brothels, marijuana, euthanasia and same-sex marriage.