Vatican



Pope Francis sits next to Maltese Archbishop Charles Scicluna aboard a catamaran leaving Valletta's harbor for Gozo in Malta during a papal trip April 2, 2022. (Andreas Solaro/Pool via AP)



Joshua J. McElwee

View Author Profile



Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

View Author Profile

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Pope Francis' lead clergy abuse investigator has acknowledged survivors' frustrations with the Vatican's strict culture of secrecy about Catholic bishops accused of misconduct or cover-up. Victims who bring a claim forward have a right to know how it is handled, said Maltese Archbishop Charles Scicluna.

In a National Catholic Reporter interview, Scicluna admitted the Vatican is not at what he termed "an optimal point" with regard to how it follows up with abuse victims, calling the matter "something that needs to be developed."

Scicluna, who serves as an adjunct secretary for the Vatican's powerful Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and has investigated abuse claims across the world, said, "Most of the suffering I have seen is when victims are left in the dark without any follow-up of the disclosure they have given."

"We have a law and we have a system which empowers people to disclose abuse or misconduct, but you also have the right to know what happens with their reports," he said.

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Scicluna was responding in the interview to a question about the Vatican's handling of the case of French Bishop Michel Santier, who resigned from leadership of the Créteil Diocese in January 2021. Although Santier initially said he was resigning due to health reasons, several French outlets later reported the bishop had been under investigation at the Vatican for alleged spiritual and sexual abuse of at least two men in the 1990s.

While Scicluna said he could not comment on the Santier case specifically, he added: "I realize that these situations create frustration and a sense of loss."

Scicluna, speaking in a 45-minute interview on Jan. 5 focused primarily on the legacy of the late Pope Benedict XVI, also declined to make any comment on the case of Slovenian Jesuit Fr. Marko Rupnik, an internationally recognized religious artist who has been restricted from ministry after adult women accused him of spiritual and sexual misconduct.

The Jesuit order announced the restrictions against Rupnik on Dec. 2. The Jesuit superior general, Fr. Arturo Sosa, later acknowledged that the Vatican's doctrinal office had first prosecuted Rupnik for at least one case of abuse of an adult woman in 2019.



Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich, left, and Malta Archbishop Charles Scicluna attend the opening session of the Vatican summit on the protection of minors in the church Feb. 21, 2019. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Scicluna spoke at length with NCR about his work with both Benedict and Francis. The Maltese prelate served as a staff member in the 2000s under Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the future Benedict, while Ratzinger was prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Scicluna has since also worked closely with Francis, and helped organize a historic 2019 sexual abuse summit at the Vatican.

Scicluna characterized the different work of Benedict and Francis to respond to clergy sexual abuse as part of a "continuum" of efforts.

"Francis is not copying Benedict; Francis is Francis. But there is a continuum, and there is a consistency," said Scicluna.

"Francis takes the theology of solidarity to a very deep way; when one member suffers, we all suffer," said the archbishop. "There is a continuum, but there is also a

development; it is not simply repeating."

The status of *Vos Estis*

In terms of Francis' efforts, Scicluna addressed the status of *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* ("You are the light of the world"), a 2019 document issued *motu proprio*, or on the pope's own initiative. It mandated that all priests and members of religious orders worldwide be obligated to report suspicion of abuse or cover-up to their bishop or superior.

The document, which also created a new global system for evaluation of reports of abuse or cover-up by bishops, was initially approved for a three-year *ad experimentum* trial period, which lapsed last summer.

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The archbishop confirmed that *Vos Estis* is still in effect. He compared the process of its updating to how *Sacramentorum Sanctitatis Tutela*, a *motu proprio* that Pope John Paul II first issued in 2001 to task the doctrinal office with handling abuse cases, was later updated by Benedict in 2010 and then again by Francis in 2021.

"The fact that something is *ad experimentum* doesn't mean that it has an expiration," said Scicluna. "It's obviously a signal that this is probably not perfect, and we're going to tweak it to make it more in light with reality, because sometimes reality goes beyond what the law says."

With regard to what has been learned over the three years *Vos Estis* has been in effect, Scicluna spoke of focusing on implementing the document, and making sure that all Catholics are empowered to report suspicions of abuse.

"The law is an instrument, but it's not magic," said the archbishop. "If you don't want to implement it, it's not going to be implemented, and that is a challenge."



Archbishop Charles Scicluna of Malta speaks at a news conference presenting Pope Francis' document *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* ("You are the light of the world") at the Vatican May 9, 2019. (CNS/Robert Duncan)

"Are we going to accept the values and the uncomfortable situation that legislation like ... *Vos Estis* puts us in?" he asked. "That is the question. And are the people empowered enough? Do they know about these laws? Are they aware of these laws? And are they also willing to make the letter of the law something that is alive?"

Scicluna invoked the concept of synodality, the focus of Francis' reinvigorated three-year process for the ongoing Synod of Bishops. That process has included consultations with Catholics across the world and will lead to two Rome meetings of bishops in October 2023 and October 2024.

"If synodality is not going to be pie in the sky, we need to come to these sort of nitty-gritty things that empower the people to look at leadership as stewardship, as Jesus wants it," said the archbishop. "And that is holding persons of leadership to account. It's something that needs to be done."

Seeing Ratzinger 'mature' on abuse

Scicluna spoke to NCR just hours after Francis celebrated the historic Vatican funeral for Benedict, the first pope to voluntarily resign from the papacy in more than 700 years. At the beginning of the interview, the archbishop recalled at length his time working under Ratzinger at the Vatican's doctrinal office.



Pope Benedict XVI presides at a Mass attended by Australian bishops, priests, religious and seminarians at St. Mary's Cathedral in Sydney July 19, 2008. During the

service, the pope apologized to victims of clergy sexual abuse. (CNS/Courtesy of World Youth Day 2008)

After serving for several years at the Apostolic Signatura, the Catholic Church's highest judicial authority, Scicluna first arrived at what was then the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2002. He took up the role of the office's Promoter of Justice, or lead prosecutor, which he would hold until 2012, when he returned home to eventually become the archbishop of Malta.

Scicluna said he arrived as the Vatican was dealing with an "avalanche" of abuse cases, starting after the 2002 reporting on widespread abuse and cover-up in the Boston Archdiocese. He said he and Ratzinger would meet every Friday to discuss the pending abuse cases.

"I saw ... Cardinal Ratzinger mature in his understanding of the phenomenon," said Scicluna. "We were reviewing hundreds of cases every year and the narratives teach you a lot. They teach you about not only human weakness, but also the dark face of abuse, the effects on victims and also the fact that there is a narrative that repeats itself."

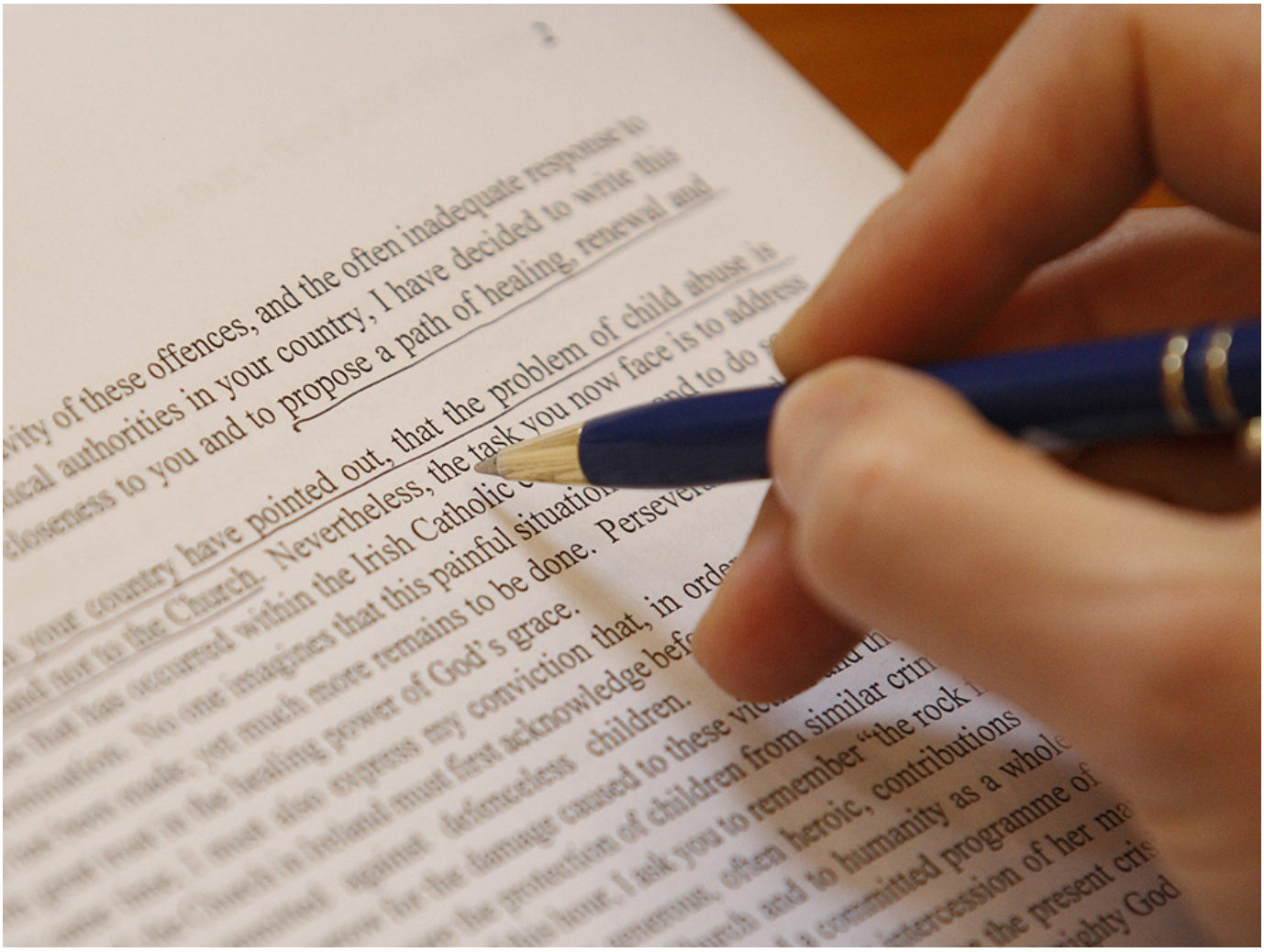
The archbishop praised Ratzinger for how he coordinated his staff, saying, "He had the humility to rely on us experts."

"He knew his limits in canon law," said Scicluna. "But he had this huge understanding of human nature, and also the theology and the anthropology behind misconduct, which obviously brought a deepening of discernment on the case and what to do under specific circumstances."

Human limits and fallibility

As for possible mistakes Ratzinger or the office may have made, the archbishop said: "There may be issues where things ... could have been decided in a better way. But that's the case. Whatever you try to do, that will always be the case."

Asked about critics who say Ratzinger might have done more under John Paul to hold individual bishops accountable for perpetrating cover-ups to protect abusive priests, Scicluna responded simply: "It was not his role as prefect."



A reporter reviews Pope Benedict XVI's pastoral letter to Ireland's Catholics after its release at the Vatican press office March 20, 2010. In the letter, Benedict apologized to victims of clerical sexual abuse and announced steps to heal wounds of the scandal. (CNS/Paul Haring)

As for whether Ratzinger did enough after being elected as pope in 2005, the archbishop responded: "At the end, when you're pope, you're pope. You can't say, 'I'm not pope.' [But] it depends obviously on the information you get."

Scicluna praised Benedict for his 2010 letter to Catholics in Ireland, in which the pontiff apologized to abuse victims in the country, charged bishops to cooperate with civil authorities investigating abuse claims, and announced initial plans for Vatican investigations of Irish dioceses, seminaries and religious orders.

Scicluna called that letter "a point of reference" and said it contains "the premises" for how Francis would later respond to the abuse crisis, including in Francis' own

"Letter to the Pilgrim People of God in Chile." That letter, issued in 2018 after Francis had angered abuse victims and advocates during his visit to Chile that year, included the pope admitting his shame over his actions.



Archbishop Charles Scicluna of Malta speaks with members of the Catholic community inside a church in Osorno, Chile, June 14, 2018. Scicluna was on a pastoral mission in Osorno to promote healing in the wake of a clerical sexual abuse crisis. (CNS/Reuters/Fernando Lavoz)

"You see, there is a continuum," the archbishop said of Benedict's and Francis' responses to the crisis. "Obviously, they are different people ... but you see a desire to offer an adequate response within the limits of human discernment, and also the fallibility of human judgment. And that is something that I think needs to also be factored in."

Recalling his initial days as one of Ratzinger's staff, the archbishop remembered the cardinal making a special effort to help with his work.

Upon arriving at the building for his first day in 2002, Scicluna said he noticed his new office did not have a computer. He said he told Ratzinger's second-in-command, then-Archbishop Tarcisio Bertone, that he needed a computer to do his work.

Although there wasn't funding in the budget for the purchase, Ratzinger provided the device. "The cardinal actually bought my first computer from his own pocket," Scicluna remembered.

A version of this story appeared in the **Jan 20-Feb 2, 2023** print issue under the headline: Scicluna: Vatican must treat abuse victims better.