Vatican
Vatican News



Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner is pictured during a symposium at Fordham University in New York City in this March 26, 2019, file photo. (OSV News/CNS file, Gregory A. Shemitz)



by Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

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

Rome — March 29, 2023
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

One of Pope Francis' key advisers on clergy sexual abuse has resigned from the pontiff's child protection commission and has launched searing criticisms against the organization's leadership and its alleged lack of transparency.

The president of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, Boston's Cardinal Sean O'Malley, announced on March 29 that one of the commission's founding members, German Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner, had asked the pope "to be relieved of his duties as a member."

O'Malley's statement, which praised Zollner as a global "ambassador" for combating clergy sexual abuse, said that Zollner had resigned due to his new appointment earlier this month as a consultant to the Diocese of Rome's safeguarding office.

Yet in an unusually blunt 400-word statement issued several hours later, Zollner said that after nine years of service on the commission, it was "impossible" to continue given his mounting concerns "in the areas of responsibility, compliance, accountability and transparency."

"I am convinced that these are principles that any church institution, let alone the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, is bound to uphold," he wrote.

The pontifical abuse commission was first established by Francis in 2014 as a high-level entity to advise the pope on child prevention and accountability measures.

O'Malley, widely considered a pivotal figure in the Catholic Church's abuse prevention efforts, has served as its president since its inception. Zollner, a

respected psychologist and psychotherapist, was among its founding members.

Boston Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley, president of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of

Boston Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley, president of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, delivers the homily during the closing Mass of the National Prayer Vigil for Life Jan. 21, 2020, at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington. (CNS photo/Gregory L. Tracy, The Pilot)

Over the last decade, however, the commission has witnessed the exit of several high-profile members, including Irish abuse survivor Marie Collins, who resigned in 2017, citing frustration with Vatican officials' reluctance to cooperate with its work.

But with Zollner's departure, the commission has now lost someone long-perceived as a key ally of Francis' reform efforts, having been selected by Francis as one of the main organizers of his historic February 2019 abuse summit at the Vatican.

His departure also comes less than a week after the pope expanded and made permanent one of his signature reforms on clergy abuse: a law known as *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* ("You are the light of the world"), which was designed to hold bishops and religious superiors accountable for abuse that they commit or cover up, and which Zollner applauded at the time.

Neither Zollner nor the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors immediately responded to NCR's requests for comment on the priest's resignation.

In his statement, Zollner, who is the head of the Pontifical Gregorian University's Institute of Anthropology, enumerated a number of concerns regarding the current

leadership of the commission. He said there had been a lack of clarity regarding "the selection process of members and staff and their respective roles and responsibilities."

Advertisement

In June 2021, Francis named Oblate Fr. Andrew Small as secretary "pro tempore" of the commission. Small is a lawyer and former foreign policy advisor for the U.S. bishops' conference. Under his interim leadership, the commission reshuffled its membership last September by naming 10 new members and reappointing 10 returning members.

Zollner went on to raise concerns about the commission's financial accountability, its internal decision-making and its relationship with the Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, which under the Vatican's new apostolic constitution, places the previously independent commission under the dicastery's jurisdiction.

In recent months, two other former commissioners have voiced their concerns about the current commission's effectiveness.

In a Nov. 22 essay for the British Catholic weekly The Tablet, Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood Sr. Jane Bertelsen wrote that "a collaborative, synodal style of working … was not evident in my last few months on the commission."

British Baroness Sheila Hollins, another founding member of the commission, cast doubt on the commission's newly launched plans to produce an annual audit of all 114 bishops' conference's safeguarding reports, beginning in 2024, in a Nov. 28 public lecture.

In his prepared statement, Zollner said he hoped the issues he raised could be resolved in a "sustainable way" and that he remains open to discussing safeguarding

issues with the commission.

A version of this story appeared in the **April 14-27, 2023** print issue under the headline: Jesuit resigns from pope's clergy abuse commission, criticizing group's leadership.