Vatican

Vatican News



Pope Francis holds his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican, on March 6, 2024. Pope Francis sought Thursday to encourage his child protection board to continue helping victims, as new developments underscored that the Catholic Church’s clergy sex abuse scandal isn’t going away anytime soon. At the Vatican, Francis met with his Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, which is expected to soon release the the first-ever audit of safeguarding procedures and policies church-wide. (AP/Gregorio Borgia)

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Pope Francis sought to encourage his child protection board on Thursday to continue helping victims, as new developments outside the Vatican underscored that the Catholic Church's clergy sex abuse scandal isn't going away anytime soon.

Francis met with his Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, which is expected to soon release the first-ever audit of safeguarding procedures and policies church-wide.

But as that report is being compiled, church officials in Switzerland reported a surge in victims coming forward since the September publication of a bombshell report that found over 1,000 cases of abuse since the mid-20th century in a country with a relatively small Catholic population.

The diocese in northwestern Basel, for example, reported that more than half of the suspected 183 cases in the last 13 years emerged in the last six months. Swiss news agency SDA-Keystone reported at least 70 other cases across four other dioceses since the report was issued.

Closer to home, a criminal court in Sicily handed down an important verdict this week against a priest whom the Vatican apparently exonerated on a technicality even after one of his victims wrote to Francis, begging for him to intervene.

The case was being closely watched since Italy's Catholic hierarchy has only recently and reluctantly begun confronting its legacy of abuse in a country where the issue is still somewhat taboo.

The verdict by the tribunal in Enna sentenced the priest, the Rev. Giuseppe Rugolo, to four and a half years in prison for attempted sexual violence and violence-related charges against three minors. The court also held his diocese, Piazza Armerina, Sicily, responsible for paying civil damages and legal fees, according to the sentence on Tuesday.

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Piazza Armeria Bishop Rosario Gisana was caught on intercepted wiretaps confessing to having covered up for the priest. But a lawyer for the diocese, Gabriele Cantaro, stressed in a statement Thursday that the liability didn't stem from the actions of Gisana or his predecessor, but merely from the diocese's general responsibility for the actions of its priests.

According to the newspaper Domani, which covered the case closely, the Vatican’s sex abuse office shelved the case on technical grounds because Rugolo was only a seminarian when the abuse occurred. The Vatican’s in-house norms at the time only called for canonical sanctions against priests who abused minors, not seminarians.

Il Messaggero newspaper reported in 2021 that one of Rugolo’s victims wrote to Francis directly, begging him to intervene after he and his parents had spent years trying to get the church to take action against Rugolo, who was sent to a diocese in northern Italy after the accusations were raised.

Amid Italian media coverage of the case, Francis on Nov. 6 heartily praised Gisana when the bishop led a group of pilgrims to the Vatican.

“This bishop is great. He was persecuted, calumnied but he’s been firm, always correct, a correct man,” Francis said in remarks that outraged victims' advocates.

Francis told his child protection advisers on Thursday that listening to victims was crucial to helping them heal.

“In our ecclesial ministry of protecting minors, closeness to victims of abuse is no abstract concept, but a very concrete reality, comprised of listening, intervening, preventing and assisting,” he said in remarks read by an aide as Francis continues to recover from the flu.