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Pope Francis poses for a photo with Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley of Boston, president of the Pon

Pope Francis poses with Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley of Boston, president of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, during a private audience at the Vatican April 4, 2019. O'Malley was at the Vatican for meetings of the commission and also the Council of Cardinals, a group that advises Pope Francis. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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Less than one week after the head of the Vatican's communications department strongly defended his office's continued use of the artwork of alleged serial abuser Fr. Marko Rupnik, the president of Pope Francis' own abuse prevention commission has written to every Vatican department urging them not to use artwork of alleged perpetrators of abuse.

"We must avoid sending a message that the Holy See is oblivious to the psychological distress that so many are suffering," read the letter sent by Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston to the heads of Vatican dicasteries on June 26.

"Pastoral prudence would prevent displaying artwork in a way that could imply either exoneration or a subtle defense" of alleged abuse perpetrators "or indicate indifference to the pain and suffering of so many victims of abuse," the letter stated.

Excerpts from the cardinal's letter were included in a June 28 press release from the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors. O'Malley, who sits on the pope's Council of Cardinal Advisers, has served as president of the commission since its formation in 2014 and has long held a reputation as a reformer in abuse prevention efforts.

According to their statement, the commission has been in contact with a range of abuse victims and survivors expressing their "frustration and concern" at the continued use of Rupnik's art by several Vatican offices, including the Dicastery for Communications.

During a June 21 speech at the Catholic Media Conference in the United States, Paolo Ruffini, prefect of the communications dicastery, was directly asked about his office's continued use of Rupnik's art.

Removing Rupnik's art, Ruffini insisted, "is not a Christian response."

"As Christian(s), we are asked not to judge," he told the conference attendees, adding that a Vatican investigation into Rupnik is still ongoing, "an anticipation of a decision is something that is not, in our opinion, is not good."

The communications dicastery frequently uses Rupnik's art to accompany its online liturgical calendar, including earlier this month on the Solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus on June 7.

During the Catholic Media Conference, Ruffini was specifically pressed about how the continued use of the artwork might resonate with victims.

"I don't think we have to throw stones thinking that this is the way of healing," he said.

"Do you think that if I put away a photo of an art (away) from ... our website, I will be more close to the victims? Do you think so?" he asked the journalists. When given an answer in the affirmative, Ruffini responded: "I think you're wrong."

For years, the prolific and sought after Rupnik received commissions for his artwork in basilicas and chapels all over the world, including the Vatican.

In 2023, the Jesuit order expelled the Slovenian priest from their congregation following reports of serial sexual, spiritual and psychological abuses over a 30-year period. Despite allegations of abuse from at least two dozen women, he was welcomed back into ministry in his native Diocese of Kosper, Slovenia.

Following mounting pressure last fall, Francis removed the statute of limitations and reopened the investigation against Rupnik. At the time, the Vatican statement acknowledged that there had been "serious problems" in the way the case had been handled and cited concerns raised by the Vatican's own anti-abuse commission over the "lack of outreach to victims."

Since then, there has been a vociferous debate about the continued use and display of his art, including from some of Rupnik's alleged victims who argue they were abused by the artist during the creation of his art.

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A decision from the Catholic bishops in France is expected soon on whether they will keep Rupnik's mosaics at the Lourdes basilica and there have been active calls for the removal of his artwork at the Pope John Paul II Shrine in Washington, D.C. Even in Rome, the Vatican's synod office has removed the use of Rupnik's artwork in its materials.

Ruffini's recalcitrant defense of Rupnik's artwork contrasted with O'Malley's plea against its continued use sets up a stark contrast between two Vatican offices, in an institution where disagreement among senior officials rarely spills out into public.

"Pope Francis has urged us to be sensitive to and walk in solidarity with those harmed by all forms of abuse," O'Malley wrote in his letter to the Vatican dicastery heads. "I ask you to bear this in mind when choosing images to accompany the publication of messages, articles, and reflections through the various communication channels available to us."

Ruffini did not immediately respond to NCR's request for comment on whether the communications dicastery would revisit its policies on the continued use of Rupnik's artwork.

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