Vatican

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From left, Monsignior Luis Herrera, Cardinal Sean Patrick O' Malley, jurist Maud de Boer-Buquicchio and clergy sex abuse survivor and victim's advocate Juan Carlos Cruz, pose for a photo at the end of a press conference to present the Vatican's first Annual Global Report on Minors Protection at the Vatican press center, Tuesday, Oct. 29, 2024. (AP/Alessandra Tarantino)

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Pope Francis' child protection board called Tuesday for victims of clergy sexual abuse to have greater access to information about their cases and the right to compensation, in the first-ever global assessment of the Catholic Church's efforts to address the crisis.

The Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors issued a series of findings and recommendations in its pilot annual report, zeroing in on the church in a dozen countries, two religious orders and two Vatican offices with detailed analysis.

In its most critical note, it called for greater transparency from the Vatican's sex abuse office, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. It said the office's slow processing of cases and secrecy were retraumatizing to victims, and its refusal to publish statistics or its own jurisprudence continues "to foment distrust among the faithful, especially the victim/survivor community."

Cardinal Sean O'Malley, the commission's head, acknowledged the church's failure to victims in the past and said the commission would work to continue to address "the unjust suffering that you have endured."

"Nothing we do will ever be enough to fully repair what has happened,'' O'Malley told a news conference. "But we hope that this report and those that will come, compiled with the help of victims and survivors at the center, will help to ensure the firm commitment that these events never happen again in the church.''

The 50-page report marks something of a milestone for the commission, which in its 10-year existence has struggled to find its footing in a Vatican often resistant to confronting the abuse crisis and hostile to endorsing victim-focused policies.

Juan Carlos Cruz, a survivor of sexual abuse who sits on the commission, said the report represented a significant step forward and gave him hope for further progress.

"We’re using words that we didn’t use before. Truth, justice, reparation and a guarantee of non-recurrence. Those are heavy, heavy words that before were taboo in many places,'' he told the news conference.

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Francis created the commission in 2014, a year after his election, to advise the Vatican on best practices to prevent clergy sexual abuse. He named Cardinal O’Malley, then Boston's archbishop, as the commission’s head.

After several founding members resigned in frustration over Vatican stonewalling and the commission’s own internal problems, the commission has stabilized in recent years, focusing on realistic areas where it can be of service. One key priority has been providing funding and expertise to churches in poorer countries where there are fewer resources to craft and implement child protection guidelines and tend to victims.

In its report, the commission noted, for example, that the Catholic Church in Mexico is hampered by “significant cultural barriers to reporting abuse that prevent the process of justice.” In Papua New Guinea, limited funding means insufficient training for church personnel and services for victims. Even rape kits that are needed for criminal investigations are prohibitively expensive, the report found.

Its main conclusions, though, were of a global nature: Victims, it said, must have the right to information about their cases held by the church, since the secrecy and long processing times often serve to revictimize them. It proposed a special Vatican advocate or ombudsman to look after victims’ needs.

As a function of restorative justice — termed "conversional justice” — victims must have the right to compensation for their abuse, including financial reparations but also public apologies to help them heal, it said.

And it called for a more uniform definition and understanding of church policies to protect “vulnerable adults” from abuse, moving beyond the tendency to only consider abuse of minors as criminal. The call is meant to address demands that the church do more to protect religious sisters, seminarians and even ordinary adult faithful from religious gurus who abuse their authority and take advantage of adults under their spiritual sway.

Francis in 2022 asked the commission to produce the report, saying he wanted an audit of progress of what is being done well and what must change.

The commission noted that in at least this first effort, the report wasn't an audit of the incidence of abuse in the church. It said in order to become an actual auditing mechanism, “the commission would need access to more specific statistical information” from the Vatican sex abuse office, which receives all credible reports of abuse of minors in the church but apparently hasn’t provided the data to the commission.

One of the commission members, legal expert Maud de Boer-Buquicchio, acknowledged that the report “is far from perfect.”

“But it has a sound methodology that will grow over time to become increasingly comprehensive and robust,'' she said, adding that data could be “significantly improved” by cross-referencing with external sources.

The commission called for greater collaboration and dialogue with the office, and said it was “pleased to note the dicastery is exploring what steps can be undertaken” to help bishops and religious superiors tend to victims.

It also called for the office to make more public its work, including via academic lectures and conferences, and also offer more material to bishops to help them administer justice.

Francis earlier this year allowed O’Malley to retire, five years beyond the normal retirement age for bishops, and recently hinted that leadership of the commission would pass to its current No. 2 official, Bishop Luis Manuel Ali Herrera.