News



Sarah Pearson, right, and Peter Isely lead a press conference by the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, in Rome, on April 30, 2025. (RNS/Aleja Hertzler-McCain)



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An advocacy group of survivors of clerical abuse is raising concerns about several cardinals who are buzzed about as papabili, or potential popes.

Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests held a press conference Wednesday (April 30) in a hotel next to Pope Francis' resting place at the Basilica of St. Mary Major to announce new information about prominent cardinals the group accuses of covering up or mishandling sexual abuse cases. In addition to compiling accusations and information for the public, SNAP has filed complaints with the Vatican under Pope Francis' *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* ("You are the light of the world") laws, intended to confront abuse.

Among those named in the group's complaints are Cardinals Luis Antonio Tagle, Péter Erdő, Robert Prevost and Joseph Tobin. SNAP claimed there is evidence of their ignoring or covering up reports of abuse and seeks full investigations.

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" We're not saying that these individuals are guilty," Peter Isely, a founding member of SNAP and a clerical abuse survivor, said of SNAP's list. "We are saying there is evidence, compelling evidence, that there should be a full investigation launched about the conduct of this particular cardinal."

On its website, SNAP also accuses Cardinal Dominique Mamberti, another potential papabile who also has the role of announcing the next pope, of participating in the

cover-up of abuse by both infamous ex-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick and another prelate Mamberti supervised, although the group has not yet filed a Vos Estis report. Mamberti is one of six cardinals added to the SNAP list in the last two weeks.

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" When the white smoke comes out of the Sistine Chapel, we don't want another survivor or family member or whistleblower to hear the name of the next pope and think, 'That's somebody who's caused deep harm in my life. That's somebody who's been a source of terror and a source of pain,' " said Sarah Pearson, a survivor who leads SNAP's media and communications.

Pearson referenced the story of an Argentine mother who allegedly went to then-Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio's offices to speak about the abuse of her son by a priest and was refused a meeting with the cardinal and taken away by security. In addition to discussing Pope Francis, SNAP survivors at the meeting also brought up allegations that Popes Benedict XVI and John Paul II covered up abuse.

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The advocacy effort, titled Conclave Watch, also noted cover-up accusations against several men in key leadership roles during the papal transition, including Cardinal Kevin Farrell, the camerlengo, and Cardinal Reinhard Marx, who is assisting Farrell.

Survivors "meet an extraordinary wall of resistance and obfuscation and deceit and aggression around the world by bishops and church officials," Isely said.

"Many survivors have dealt with what happened to them, that come to terms with the offender," Isely said. "What they have not been able to come to terms with and heal is how their bishop or their cardinal" maintained or covered up child abuse.

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In addition to sharing information about cardinals who were allegedly negligent about abuse claims, SNAP is pressing all cardinals to back its proposed zero-tolerance law requiring the Catholic Church to permanently remove all abusers from ministry. The proposed church law would also form an independent compliance

agency to investigate those in positions of authority who concealed abuse, then require publishing investigations and penalties for church officials found guilty of concealing abuse.

Isely also expressed outrage that while women and married men are barred from being priests, "you can be a child molester and a priest — that you can do under church rules."

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The group also brought up the case of 81-year-old Cardinal Juan Luis Cipriani, who has participated in pre-conclave meetings even though he is ineligible to vote because of his age. But Cipriani was restricted by the Vatican because of accusations that he had sexually abused minors, yet he appears to be flouting those restrictions in his participation.

"This man has no place there, no place there," said Pearson. "It's wildly inappropriate, and this is an example of what happens when a person does not lose their rank and title, from what they have done."

SNAP leaders said they believe they are being heard, however, because Cardinal Mario Grech rebutted the group's accusations about him in response to a Times of Malta inquiry. SNAP said Grech's claims are "provably false," but his response demonstrates the group's reach.

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The survivors have also approached several cardinals in person, leading Cardinal Peter Turkson to invite the group to attend a presentation on artificial intelligence and child safety.

The 20 cardinal profiles that SNAP, which is U.S.-based, has on its website heavily feature U.S. cardinals, naming all 10 U.S. cardinal electors.

SNAP leaders said abuse survivors are just beginning the process of coming forward in other parts of the world.

" Parts of Africa are by far the most dangerous for children in the Catholic Church, and the survivors who come forward there face enormous shunning, face enormous

threats," including to their lives, Isely said.

Pearson told Religion News Service that laws in the U.S. have allowed for more transparency and a stronger paper trail, leading to the group's ability to report "horrifying" allegations. She said she was particularly troubled to read about retired Washington Cardinal Wilton Gregory being held in contempt of court, when as Belleville, Illinois, bishop in 2004, he refused to release the mental health records of a retired priest accused of abuse.

Meanwhile, John Carr, a survivor of clerical abuse who led a major department at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops for over two decades, spoke highly of several U.S. cardinals on SNAP's list in an April 30 interview with RNS.

He particularly commended Gregory for his work in leading the conference as president in 2002 to institute the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, calling him "a profile in courage in standing up for survivors and victims and insisting on the zero-tolerance program against enormous resistance."

"Nobody did enough, but some people, including Cardinal Gregory, did more than most and showed courage in standing with survivors and families," Carr said. Nevertheless, he said, clergy abuse "still haunts us and there's more work to be done."

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