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Vatican to stage major symposium on sex abuse crisis

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 21, 2011

In tandem with the Jesuit-run Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, the Vatican plans to hold a major symposium on the sexual abuse crisis in February 2012, directed at bishops? conferences and religious orders, and intended to promote ?a global response to the problem? and ?protection of the vulnerable.?

One thrust, according to organizers, will be to foster application of a recent set of guidelines for combating abuse issued by the Vatican?s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Released May 16, that document called on bishops to focus on support for victims, on creating a safe environment in the church, and on cooperation with police and civil prosecutors when crimes against minors occur.

The idea was to promote greater uniformity, given that some bishops? conferences, especially in Europe and North America, have adopted detailed policies on sex abuse, while in other parts of the world cases are dealt with on an ad hoc basis. The doctrinal congregation has directed conferences that don?t yet have policies on abuse to develop them by May 2012.

Plans for the February 2012 symposium, titled ?Toward Healing and Renewal,? were announced June 13. More than 200 representatives of episcopal conferences and religious communities are expected to attend the event, where a new multilingual ?e-learning? center for church officials, designed to collect and promote ?best practices,? will be introduced.

Details of the event were to be presented in a press conference at the Gregorian on June 18 with Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, and Maltese Msgr. Charles Scicluna, the Vatican?s chief prosecutor on sex abuse cases.

A preparatory committee for the symposium will be led by German Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner, who heads an Institute for Psychology at the Gregorian. In 2010, Zollner and another Jesuit, Italian Fr. Giovanni Cucci, published a book on the crisis titled *The Church and Pedophilia: An Open Wound*. In it, they argued that a media-induced ?moral panic? over pedophilia, presenting old cases as new and distorting the statistical dimensions of the problem, ?doesn?t help anybody.?

Also involved in the preparation, according to the announcement, are Fr. Klaus Peter Franzl, financial director of the Munich archdiocese in Germany; French Jesuit Fr. François-Xavier Dumortier, rector of the Gregorian; and Baroness Sheila Hollins, a professor of psychiatry at St George?s, University of London. A Catholic, Hollins is a former president of the Royal College of Psychiatrists and an expert on the mental health of people with learning disabilities, with a focus on bereavement, palliative care and sexual abuse.

According to the announcement, several Vatican departments will be involved in organizing the event, to be presented in four languages.

Though a complete schedule for the symposium was not released, organizers said there will be a session on the ?Virtus? program developed in the late 1990s in the United States by the National Catholic Risk Retention

Group. Its centerpiece is ?Protecting God?s Children,? a program that trains clergy, religious, teachers, staff, volunteers and parents about the warning signs of abuse and ways to prevent it, as well as how to make a report and how to respond to an allegation.

The program is presently in use in more than 80 dioceses across the United States.

Although critics have faulted the Vatican for not imposing a uniform global policy on abuse, including the ?one strike? standard at the heart of the American approach -- meaning permanent removal from ministry for one act of sexual abuse -- all signs are that primary responsibility for setting policy will continue to reside with bishops? conferences and religious orders.

When the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued its guidelines in May, officials said they represent suggestions, rather than hard-and-fast edicts, for two reasons: first, out of ?respect for the fundamental competence of the diocesan bishop,? as well as religious superiors, to supervise clergy; second, because the broad principles in the letter ?naturally must be adapted to national realities.?

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