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SNAP: Submit evidence of abuse to ICC

by Carol Glatz by Catholic News Service



The entrance of the International Criminal Court is seen in The Hague in this March 2011 file photo. (CNS photo/Jerry Lampen, Reuters)

ROME -- A sex abuse victims' advocacy group and a human rights' organization called on all current and past Vatican and church employees to send any information about the clerical abuse of minors to the International Criminal Court.

"What we're asking is for a security guard, a secretary, any church worker," not just high level officials, to send any evidence they may have concerning past or current abuse cases to the prosecutor of the world court in The Hague, Netherlands, said Vincent Warren, executive director of the Center for Constitutional Rights.

Attorneys from the New York-based organization and members of the U.S.-based Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, known as SNAP, spoke at a news conference in Rome Sept. 20 one week after

formally filing a petition to the court.

The groups are calling on the world court to conduct an investigation, charging Pope Benedict XVI and three other top Vatican officials with the "systematic and widespread practice of enabling, concealing and tolerating ongoing rape and other forms of sexual violence by clerics across the globe," the groups said in a Sept 20 press release.

Human rights' attorney Pam Spees said the move is not "a publicity stunt."

"We studied, researched and did a legal analysis" of the validity of the charges and submitted more than 22,000 pages of evidence from different commissions and grand juries, she said.

What emerges from the documentation, she said, "is a cover-up; a pattern of policies and practices" of shifting priests, destroying documents, punishing whistleblowers and protecting perpetrators.

Spees said the fact that the court does not have jurisdiction over the Vatican is not an issue since the court does have "jurisdiction over individuals who are nationals of countries that have ratified (the ICC) treaty or if the crimes occurred in countries that ratified the treaty."

The press release said the International Criminal Court recognizes "rape, sexual violence, assault and torture as crimes against humanity. It also provides for individual criminal liability for those with command or superior responsibility over those who directly commit such crimes."

The groups' representatives said they filed the complaint with the world court because they believe the church has not done enough to deter or punish perpetrators and has not properly implemented reforms resulting in continued abuse around the world.

One abuse victim at the conference, 21-year-old Megan Peterson, said the priest who raped her in the Diocese of Crookston, Minn., repeatedly in 2004-2005 is now working in the Diocese of Ootacamund, India.

A Roseau County, Minn., prosecutor has been trying to extradite Father Joseph Jeyapaul to face charges of criminal sexual conduct.

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"The church hasn't made it zero tolerance," she said. "It saddens me that my perpetrator has the opportunity to rape more children."

Barbara Blaine, abuse survivor and president of SNAP, said priest abusers have little to fear even if they do get caught when a typical punishment is being forced to live at a retreat center at the expense of the church and not being handed over to police.

"Those indicted should face charges or at least not be supported by the church," she said, if there is to be real deterrence.

Peter Isely, survivor and a founder of SNAP, said, "With the stroke of his pen, the pope can protect children" by laicizing perpetrators. "No one who has assaulted a child should be a priest. That is zero tolerance," he said.

In 2010, the Vatican revised its procedures for handling priestly sex abuse cases, streamlining disciplinary measures, and extending the statute of limitations. Vatican officials said the changes allow the church to deal with abuse cases more rapidly and effectively, often by dismissing the offending cleric from the priesthood.

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