

Bishops get earful at Vatican sex abuse summit

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 13, 2012



Priests pray during a Feb. 7 penitential vigil at St. Ignatius Church in Rome to show contrition for clerical sexual abuse. (CNS/Paul Haring)

ROME -- Though a four-day summit in Rome on the sexual abuse crisis was, in a sense, directed at everyone, its primary audience was composed of approximately 100 bishops and superiors of religious orders from around the world, who face a Vatican-imposed May deadline to submit their anti-abuse policies.

As it turns out, those church potentates got an earful.

First, they were told, if you come from a place where you think sexual abuse of children isn't a problem, think again. Experts said child abuse occurs at roughly the same high levels in every region of the world, so that if the clerical abuse crisis has not yet exploded someplace, it's only a matter of time.

Second, the bishops were warned, if you drop the ball on handling abuse charges, be ready to face the music. There seems to be a new determination in the Vatican and across the Catholic world to use the tools of church law to hold bishops accountable.

Those were among the highlights of a Feb. 6-9 symposium titled "Toward Healing and Renewal," held at Rome's Jesuit-run Gregorian University, and cosponsored by a variety of Vatican departments.

The warning about the global dimension of the crisis came from American Msgr. Stephen Rossetti, former director of the St. Luke Institute, a facility in Silver Spring, Md., that treats abuser priests.



Church leaders around the world began by saying, "This is only an

American problem," Rossetti said. "Then, as more cases surfaced in other countries, they said, "This is an English-speaking problem." Then, as the circle of abuse cases widened, they expanded it to: "This is a Western problem."

"Each time, church leaders said, in effect, "It doesn't happen here." "

Rossetti said data show this is a global problem, with no reason to think that the Catholic church in any particular part of the world would be immune.

"If there are people in the church today who are thinking that this is not a problem in their country, I urge them to speak to those who work with children," Rossetti said. "Contact those who generously run programs for abused children or staff child abuse hotlines. Find out what is being said behind closed doors."

The call for accountability rang out in an address by Irish laywoman Marie Collins, the only victim to address the invitation-only summit.

Collins said there must be "acknowledgement and accountability for the harm and destruction that has been done to the life of victims and their families," before she and other victims can regain trust in the church's leadership.

Collins found an ally in the Vatican's top prosecutor for sex abuse cases, Maltese Msgr. Charles Scicluna, who bluntly said it is "not acceptable" for bishops to ignore anti-abuse protocols established by the Vatican or by their bishops' conference.

"We need to be vigilant in choosing candidates for the important role of bishop, and we also need to use the tools that canonical law and tradition give us for the accountability of bishops," Scicluna said.

As a case in point, Scicluna said the church in Ireland "has paid a very high price for the mistakes of some of its shepherds." He was apparently referring to a damning 2011 Irish government report, which found that officials of the Cloyne diocese flouted civil laws and church procedures on abuse complaints as recently as 2009.

Scicluna supported using church law to impose sanctions on bishops if they don't respond aggressively.

"Bishops are accountable to the Lord, but also to their people," he said during a Jan. 8 session with the media. "They owe their people good stewardship."

Bishop Daniel Conlon of Joliet, Ill., who chairs the U.S. bishops' Committee on Child and Youth Protection, called the debate over accountability "legitimate," and said in an exclusive interview with *NCR* that creating stronger mechanisms "may be a step that has to be taken."

For anyone who has followed the arc of the crisis from the beginning, the change in tone from senior Vatican officials this week, as compared to years past, was unmistakable.

Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet, who serves as prefect of the Vatican's powerful Congregation for Bishops, presided over a liturgy of repentance Feb. 7. Ouellet's presence carried symbolic importance, signifying that the crisis wasn't just a matter of priests who abuse, but also bishops who failed to act.

Ouellet said that in many instances, abusers should have been identified and removed from the priesthood much earlier, but instead were left in place.

"Once again, we apologize to the victims," he said, for their "terrible and humiliating experience."

There was also something of a reappraisal of the media's role in the crisis.

American Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, cited Canada, the United States, Brazil, Great Britain, Ireland, France, Belgium, Germany, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand as countries whose bishops have adopted strong anti-abuse policies. Yet, he conceded, bishops often acted only after damaging press coverage.

"In many cases, such response came only in the wake of the revelation of scandalous behavior by priests in the public media," he said. "What seems useful going forward is a more proactive approach."

One centerpiece of the summit was the launch of a new "Center for Child Protection," a joint project of Gregorian University's Institute of Psychology, the Munich and Freising archdiocese in Germany, and the University Clinic of Ulm, Germany. The idea is to develop an e-learning course in abuse prevention and detection in English, German, Italian and Spanish.

Even some of the more skeptical participants seemed impressed, both with what the summit achieved and what it represented.

"I think this conference is a sign of changing mindsets," Collins said. "People are very seriously and sincerely trying to get this thing right."

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