

Polish bishops apologize for clergy sexual abuse of children

Jonathan Luxmoore Catholic News Service | Oct. 10, 2013
Warsaw, Poland

Poland's Catholic bishops apologized for sexual abuse of children by priests and defended the Polish church's record on tackling abuse.

During their plenary meeting in the Polish capital, the bishops also announced that they had tightened procedures for handling abuse allegations.

"The pedophilia problem is appearing in schools, sports clubs and facilities for education and upbringing, but also, it pains us to admit, in church circles," the bishops' conference said in a statement Wednesday at the close of the meeting.

"We apologize for those clergy who have harmed children and are doing everything in our power so such situations are not repeated in future. We offer and will continue to offer pastoral and therapeutic help to harmed children and young people, and we stress there is no tolerance for pedophilia," the bishops said.

The statement called pedophilia a "most serious offense" that "cried to heaven for vengeance."

It added that Polish society needed a "thorough education" on how to protect children, but said media coverage of pedophilia should respect privacy and avoid "harming third parties such as families, schools, parishes and clergy."

Later, in a separate communique Wednesday, the bishops said their record in response to clergy abuse allegations was appropriate and criticized what they called a "media campaign" against the church in relation to such cases.

"Given the media campaign now being conducted, the bishops do not agree to sins of certain clergy being exploited to stigmatize the whole church community," the statement said.

"It is also harmful to forget the sacrificial pastoral work of thousands of priests caring for the faith of Poles and the nation's good," the bishops said. "Evil should be given its real name, and responsibility to compensate for these acts lies with those who commit the evil."

The Polish church has faced accusations of covering up sexual abuse by priests, 27 of whom have been convicted in publicized cases.

In March 2012, the bishops' conference said it had adopted guidelines in line with Vatican instructions, but would not offer material damages or "cooperate with the judicial process" when confessional secrets were involved.

Jesuit Fr. Adam Zak was named in June as the church's child protection officer. In September, the church launched an anti-abuse training program for priests and men and women religious.

The statements follow criminal investigations against Archbishop Jozef Wesolowski, who is accused of sex with male teenagers as Vatican nuncio to the Dominican Republic, and Fr. Wojciech Gil, accused of raping boys in the same country.

Bishop Jozef Guzdek of the Military Ordinariate of Poland apologized Oct. 3 and pledged "zero tolerance" after one of his priests was defrocked for raping an underage girl and forcing her to have an abortion.

A day later, the Wroclaw archdiocese defended its decision to allow a parish rector to return in his post despite being sentenced in 2002 for molesting boy altar servers.

The bishops' plenary was sidetracked by international coverage of remarks made Tuesday by its president, Archbishop Jozef Michalik of Przemyśl, who told journalists sexual abuse often occurred "when a child is looking for love" and "gets lost and draws the other person in."

The archbishop also said that divorce could be compared to sexual abuse in doing "great harm" to children, and also said "many cases of molestation could be avoided by a healthy relationship between parents."

At a later news conference, Michalik apologized for a "misunderstanding." He said he believed it was "a bad person who draws the child into the orbit of his improper interests."

The *Gazeta Wyborcza* daily said the archbishop's remarks were akin to "blaming women for rape," and would revive complaints that he had allowed a parish rector in the Przemyśl archdiocese to continue preparing children for first Communion despite being convicted of sexual abuse in 2004.

In a report Wednesday, KAI, the Polish church's Catholic information agency, said the bishops had approved new "principles for preventing cases of pedophilia" during their meeting, as well as three additions to their 2012 guidelines setting out "concrete forms of care" for victims, canonical procedures for handling accusations and an abuse-related formation program for seminarians.

It added that bishops and religious order superiors would also offer "concrete forms of spiritual and psychological help" to victims of abuse and their families.

However, the bishops' conference secretary-general, Bishop Wojciech Polak, said Tuesday that Polish law, unlike that of the U.S., placed no corporate responsibility on churches to provide financial compensation to abuse victims.

The bishop was reacting to questions about a \$64,000 court claim by a 25-year-old victim against the church's Koszalin-Kolobrzeg diocese after it failed to reach a settlement.

The claim is the first in Poland, where 64 percent of citizens negatively viewed the church's handling of abuse in an early October survey published in the *Rzeczpospolita* daily.

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