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UN sex abuse report holds bishops accountable

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NCR Today

In an unprecedented report critical of the Catholic church's handling of the clergy sexual abuse scandal, the United Nations demanded Wednesday the Vatican immediately remove all clergy known or suspected to be child abusers, turn them over to civil authorities, and hold "those who concealed their crimes" accountable.

The report by the U.N. watchdog for children's rights targets bishops for enabling the abuse over decades. Church child sex abuse watchdogs maintain many hundreds of bishops have enabled and covered up abuse but have never been held accountable by authorities inside or outside the church.

The UN report called on the Vatican to turn over tens of thousands of potentially incriminating documents held in its archives, according to various news reports.

It was the most far-reaching critique of the church hierarchy by the world body and followed its public grilling of Vatican officials last month.

The report holds the Catholic hierarchy accountable as no other report by the hierarchy has held itself accountable. After decades, the church hierarchy's efforts to deal with the sex abuse issues has focused almost entirely on the priest abusers skirting episcopal responsibilities.

In a series of hard-hitting observations, the Committee on the Rights of the Child said that "the Holy See has not acknowledged the extent of the crimes committed, has not taken the necessary measures to address cases of child sexual abuse and to protect children, and has adopted policies and practices which have led to the continuation of the abuse by and the impunity of the perpetrators."

The Vatican "has consistently placed the preservation of the reputation of the church and the protection of the perpetrators above children's best interests," the report states.

The Vatican has strongly denied such allegations, saying it has dealt forcefully with clergy sex abuse as it has encountered it. Pope Francis has set up a new commission to examine the issues.

SNAP, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, reacted to the UN report with a statement.

"It's a wake-up call, not to Catholic officials (who've known about and concealed abuse for decades and still do) but for secular officials, especially those in law enforcement, who can and should investigate Catholic abuses and cover ups and prosecute the church supervisors who are still protecting predators and endangering children," SNAP said.

"For the safety of children, we hope every head of state on the planet reads this and acts on it."

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"Of course, the quickest way to prevent child sexual violence by Catholic clerics is for Pope Francis to publicly remove all offenders from ministry and harshly punish their colleagues and supervisors who enabled their crimes. But like his predecessors, he has refused to take even tiny steps in this direction.

"This report gives hope to the hundreds of thousands of deeply wounded and still suffering clergy sex abuse victims across the world. Now it's up to secular officials to follow the UN's lead and step in to safeguard the vulnerable because Catholic officials are either incapable or unwilling to do so."

Read more on the U.N.'s report.

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