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UN committee report on Vatican abuse a missed opportunity

by Thomas Reese

Faith and Justice

The U.N. committee report on the Vatican's role in sexual abuse was a missed opportunity. It could have played an important role in improving the church's handling of sexual abuse; instead, it was an editorial screed.

Any examination of the sexual abuse crisis needs to do three things: 1) Review the historical facts of sexual abuse and how it was handled by the church; 2) examine current policies and procedures and how they are being enforced; and 3) make recommendations for improvement.

The report by the U.N. Committee on the Rights of Children, like many other examinations of the crisis, skips the hard work of step two, which means the recommendations in step three are meaningless.

When it comes to the historical record, the church deserves to be raked over the coals. It went through at least three stages of responding to abusive priests, all of which proved to be disastrous.

First was denial. Priests and bishops simply could not believe the abuse occurred. "How could someone I know and work with have done such a terrible thing?" The victims were not believed. We now know that the overwhelming majority of accusations were true.

The second stage was to deal with abuse as a sexual sin: demand repentance and the promise of reform. We are, after all, a forgiving church. It was thought that if the priest was moved away from "temptation" to another parish, the problem would be solved. Instead, many priests found new children to victimize and abused again. In other words, the bishops responded pastorally to the priest but ignored the risk to children.

The third stage was to deal with abuse as a psychological problem that could be cured. Priests were sent to counseling and therapy. Incompetent psychologists assured bishops they could fix the priests. They argued that it was essential, if the therapy process was going to work, that priests have the chance of returning to ministry. They tried to imitate the successful model of dealing with alcoholic priests.

Many priests, in fact, stopped abusing, but no one could say with certainty which priests were safe and which were not. While a 10 percent recidivism rate might be considered extraordinarily successful in the criminal justice system, it was not good enough if it placed children at risk. Zero tolerance was the only safe option.

At the same time the church was responding badly to the priests, it was also responding badly to the victims in at least three ways.

The first mistake was to see the victims as a financial problem. Fearing huge financial losses, bishops listened to lawyers and insurance companies, which threatened not to pay unless the diocese followed their legal strategy. These fears were real, as can be seen by the billions paid out in damages and the 11 dioceses that have gone bankrupt. Sadly, while some see these payments as a way to punish the bishops, in fact, they only punish diocesan donors and the people who would have been helped with this money. No bishop ever missed a meal because of these payouts.

But again, incompetent legal advice made matters worse. "Don't talk to the victim. Don't apologize. Stonewall. Cover up. Attack the credibility of the victim." Many victims -- who would have settled for an apology, help in covering the cost of therapy, and the assurance that other children would not be hurt -- became even angrier because of how they were treated by the diocese. They found lawyers who would sue.

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The second mistake was to see abuse as a scandal. Bishops knew parishioners would be shocked and appalled if they found out their priest was an abuser. The media would broadcast these stories throughout the diocese and perhaps even the nation. This would challenge people's faith in the goodness and wisdom of the clergy. It might also reduce donations.

But again, the bishops made matters worse. Rather than coming out all at once, bad news dribbled out over years so people were constantly reminded of the abuse crisis. Every time you think it is over, more information comes out. Even though most of the cases were old, it looked like the church still did not get it.

The third mistake was to see the abuse crisis as a power struggle. Here, the bishops saw the "secular, liberal media," which opposed them on abortion, gay marriage and contraception, as trying to destroy the church. They saw prosecutors and politicians trying to interfere in the running of the church. They saw victims' lawyers as filling their pockets with big payments. They saw liberal Catholics pushing an agenda

of married priests, women priests and democratic reform in the church.

Seeing the crisis as a power struggle made it almost impossible for the church to do the sensible thing: Have a bishop admit his mistakes, take full responsibility and resign. Resignation was seen as a victory for the lawyers, the media and those who wanted to change church practices. Instead of doing what was best for the church, bishops held on long after their credibility was destroyed, making it impossible for the church to heal.

All of this was devastating, especially on the children who were abused and on the victims the church treated badly, but it was also devastating on the church itself.

But the U.N. committee report ignores what the Vatican has done to improve things. Pope Benedict XVI made zero tolerance the universal law of the church. That means that a priest who is involved in the abuse of a child can never function as a priest again. In the last two years of his papacy, around 400 priests were dismissed from the priesthood. In addition, local churches are to follow local laws with regard to reporting abuse to civil authorities. Benedict also ordered every episcopal conference in the world to draw up policies and procedures for handling sexual abuse cases.

It would have been legitimate for the committee to ask whether these church policies are in fact being enforced and if bishops who don't follow the policies are being held accountable.

For example, Bishop Robert Finn of Kansas City, Mo., was convicted in court of not reporting a priest. He is still in office. The Italian bishops' conference has decided not to require bishops to report abusive priests to the authorities. They should be told to do so. And some bishops' conferences did not meet the deadline for submitting their policies and procedures for review. It is fine that Pope Benedict established better policies for the church, but now the Vatican needs to make sure bishops follow them.

Additionally, it is legitimate to ask what more should be done. More transparency should certainly be at the top of that list.

In December, Pope Francis announced the formation of an international commission to study the sexual abuse crisis and to come up with a list of best practices. Sharing best practices is an excellent idea so the rest of the church can learn from the U.S. church and not make the same mistakes it did. In the early days of the crisis, Europeans thought sexual abuse was an American problem. Then when it hit Ireland and England, it was labeled an "English-speaking" problem. Then it hit German-speaking countries. It was tragic to watch all of these countries' bishops repeat the errors of the American bishops.

Today, I fear Latin American and African bishops think this is a "First World" problem. They are primed to make the same mistakes all over again. They say they have not heard from many victims. Nor did the U.S. bishops until the 1990s. They need to be proactive and not wait until the problem blows up on them.

To acknowledge that the church is doing better today does not downgrade its responsibility for the terrible job it did in the past. Nor does it mean it should not constantly look for better ways to respond to abuse by priests.

The U.N. committee's 16-page report is too easy to dismiss because it was poorly done. It even told the church it should use its power to stop Catholic parents from spanking their children or from not listening to them. By getting into issues like abortion, birth control and homosexuality, the report only helps those in the church who oppose dealing with this crisis.

The report will undoubtedly be the death knell for any possibility of getting the Convention on the Rights

of the Child ratified by the U.S. Senate. That's right; the committee was raking the Vatican over the coals about an international convention the U.S. has not accepted.

The Vatican could have legitimately argued that as a signer to the convention, it is only responsible for enforcing the convention within the territory of the Vatican City State, where the only children are those of Swiss Guard officers. While this response would be technically accurate, granted the church's past record, such a response would simply not wash.

I am proud to work for a newspaper that beginning in the mid-1980s was the leader in exposing this crisis in the church. Acknowledging improvements does not excuse the past, nor does it mean that continued vigilance is no longer necessary. I was fooled too many times in the past by assurances that the church had this under control. But to move forward now requires better analysis and better recommendations than were in the U.N. committee report.

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