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O'Malley, abuse survivor named members of new Vatican clergy abuse commission

by Joshua J. McElwee

Pope Francis on Saturday announced eight members of a new commission in the Catholic church's central bureaucracy tasked with advising the pontiff on safeguarding children from sex abuse and working pastorally with abuse victims.

Among the members are Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley, four laywomen, one Italian professor, and two priests.

One of the laywomen, Marie Collins, is herself a survivor of clergy sexual abuse. An Irishwoman who has campaigned for more thorough investigation of clergy accused of abuse, Collins struggled for years to bring her own abuser to justice.

Announcing the names of the new group in a press release Saturday, the Vatican said the eight would be responsible for determining the commission's structure, outlining its duties, and putting forward names of other candidates who might join its work.

Detailing of the new commission, officially titled the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, comes as Francis has been facing renewed questioning regarding his understanding of the continuing global clergy sex abuse crisis and his lack of discussion of the topic.

The Vatican first announced the new commission in December, saying the pope decided to create the group on the advice of a group of eight cardinals from around the world who are advising him on how to reform the church's central bureaucracy. That group of eight cardinals, known as the Council of Cardinals, also includes O'Malley.

"Pope Francis has made clear that the Church must hold the protection of minors amongst Her highest priorities," said a press release Saturday announcing the move from the Vatican, signed by spokesman Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi.

The spokesman said the commission "will take a multi-pronged approach" to its duties, including: "education regarding the exploitation of children; discipline of offenders; civil and canonical duties and responsibilities; and the development of best practices as they have emerged in society at large."

Lombardi also said the commission will operate with a mindset that is "certain that the Church has a critical role to play in this field, and looking to the future without forgetting the past."

Saturday's announcement does not name any of the members of the commission as a coordinator or chair and it also does not specify where the new commission will fit in the Vatican's bureaucracy, leaving unknown what authority or influence it will have in the church's somewhat complicated organizational chart.

Some had speculated in recent weeks that the group would fall under the scope of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which is also responsible for prosecuting priests accused of abuse.

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Among the other members of the commission:

- Sheila Hollins, an Englishwoman who serves as a life peer in the House of Lords and is a specialist in mental health and is chair of the Board of Science of the British Medical Association;
- Hanna Suchocka, a Polish woman who is a specialist in constitutional law, former prime minister and attorney general of Poland, and a former ambassador of the country to the Holy See;
- Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner, a German who is a doctor of theology and a licensed psychologist and psychotherapist who services as academic vice-rector of the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome;
- Jesuit Fr. Humberto Miguel Yáñez, an Argentine who is the chair of the Gregorian's moral theology faculty and a former student in Argentina of Jesuit Fr. Jorge Maria Bergoglio, now Pope Francis.

The remaining members: Claudio Papale, a canon lawyer at the Pontifical University Urbaniana; and Catherine Bonnet, a Frenchwomen for whom the Vatican did not provide a biography.

Francis gave some of his only words on the clergy sexual abuse March 5, stating in an interview with Italy's *Corriere della Sera* daily that while abuse cases "are awful because they leave profound wounds," the church has "moved with transparency and responsibility" in dealing with the crisis.

"No one else has done more," Francis said. "Yet the church is the only one to be attacked."

Several of the members appointed Saturday took part in a 2012 summit at the Gregorian University on clergy sexual abuse.

During that summit, Collins detailed her own abuse by a priest at the age of 13 and said there must be "acknowledgement and accountability for the harm and destruction that has been done to the life of victims and their families."

Collins said then she had decided to report the abuse at the age of 47 to a parish priest, who refused to take her name or even make a report of the accusation. She said she then turned to the archbishop of the Dublin, at the time Cardinal Desmond Connell, with no better results.

"The priest who had sexually assaulted me was protected by his superiors from prosecution," she said in 2012. "He was left for months in his parish ministry which included mentoring children preparing for confirmation -- the safety of those children ignored by his superiors."

The priest was later convicted, Collins said in 2012, for assaulting another young girl.

Collins' experience with Connell may raise the question inside the commission of whether it will respond to bishops who do not act when informed of inappropriate conduct by one of their priests.

That question has been raised many times in the U.S., where several bishops are accused of mishandling priests accused of abuse. Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo., Bishop Robert Finn, for example, was convicted in 2012 of a misdemeanor count of failing to report suspected child abuse in the case of a local priest who had been known to be in possession of lewd images of children.

While the priest, Fr. Shawn Ratigan, was later sentenced to 50 years in prison, Finn has faced no ecclesiastical consequences.

Asked by *NCR* in December if the new group would also be responsible for making suggestions to the pope on how to handle bishops like Finn who are criticized for not reporting priests who commit abuse, O'Malley said he did not know.

"That's something that the church needs to address," he said, saying he did not know if it would be addressed by the new commission, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, or the Congregation for Bishops.

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