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Polish church leaders call for more action to prevent abuse by priests

by Jonathan Luxmoore by Catholic News Service

Warsaw, Poland — Poland's Catholic church has held a penitential service for victims of sexual abuse by priests after calls for more action to curb molestation in the country.

"It was said this was America's problem, and then a problem of Anglo-Saxon countries, and then a problem for the West -- the frontiers were pushed ever further so we could insist it didn't affect us," said Bishop Piotr Libera of Plock, a former bishops' conference secretary-general.

"As bishops, we must admit that, instead of putting the good of children in first place, we too often allowed ourselves to be deceived by the fraud, duplicity and denial mechanisms of perpetrators of the crime of pedophilia."

"Ashamed and repentant, we ask for forgiveness," he said in a June 20 Mass in Krakow's Jesuit basilica. "We ask God and we ask people who were hurt by the priests."

The Vatican nuncio, Archbishop Celestino Migliore, and Archbishop Wojciech Polak of Gniezno also attended the Mass.

At a parallel conference on child abuse at Krakow's Jesuit Academy, Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz said there is "no place in the priesthood or religious life" for people who harm children. He said the evil of a few caused "the distrust and suspicion of the people," and the pain of fixing the situation "cannot be compared to the injury inflicted on many young people by certain priests and monks."

The Polish church has faced accusations of covering up sexual abuse by priests, at least two dozen of whom have been convicted in publicized cases, although some analysts put the number higher.

In March 2012, the bishops' conference said it had adopted guidelines in line with Vatican instructions on abuse, but would not offer material damages or "cooperate with the judicial process" when confessional secrets were involved. Last year, it launched anti-abuse training program for priests and religious and named Jesuit Fr. Adam Zak as its child protection officer.

In October, the bishops' conference apologized for abuse by priests and approved new "principles for preventing cases of pedophilia," as well as three annexes to its 2012 guidelines setting out care for victims, canonical procedures for handling accusations and an abuse-related formation program for seminarians.

However, it again declined to offer financial compensation to victims.

The conference, the first organized by the Polish church, was attended by clergy and lay experts on child protection from Poland and abroad, including Monica Applewhite, a U.S. expert in abuse prevention strategies, and Fr. Robert Oliver of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

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