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Bishops' representatives hear from sex abuse victim

Carol Glatz Catholic News Service | Jun. 8, 2011

ROME -- For the first time, an international meeting of bishops' representatives heard testimony from a survivor of clergy sex abuse in an effort to help clerics be more aware of the impact of abuse and to show how the church can better help victims.

The Anglophone Conference on the Safeguarding of Children, Young People and Vulnerable Adults has been meeting since 1996, and this year organizers invited Colm O'Gorman, who was abused by a priest in the diocese of Ferns, Ireland, in the 1980s.

Teresa Kettelkamp, head of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection, told Catholic News Service it was critical for church representatives from countries where the abuse problem has not yet been fully addressed to hear directly from a victim so they can have a "fuller understanding of the seriousness of this issue."

"We can always learn more of how we can better help victims-survivors heal and find reconciliation, but actually hearing directly from them and the impact the abuse had on them is always very powerful," she said.

The conference met in Rome May 30-June 3. The conference is held in different countries each year.

Kettelkamp said the international conference provides an opportunity to share ideas, research and experiences about best policies and practices for safeguarding children from abuse.

The conference, which started for bishops from English-speaking countries, has gradually expanded to include lay child protection officers, religious superiors and church leaders from around the world. This year 60 delegates attended from 20 countries, including Malaysia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone and Nigeria.

Kettelkamp told CNS June 2 that conference organizers made a concerted effort to invite representatives from more countries who could benefit from the experiences of English-speaking countries -- such as the United States, Ireland and England -- where the clergy sex abuse crisis has been more acute.

Countries where there have been few allegations of the sexual abuse of minors by clergy are not immune to abuse, she said, rather those nations are experiencing a strong culture of silence that keeps victims from coming forward.

Countries that say "they don't have any allegations, they always seem to preface it with 'yet.' That doesn't minimize that the abuse is not taking place, it's just that the culture is not at the point where people feel comfortable to come forward," said the USCCB office's outgoing executive director.

Kettelkamp was one of four delegates representing the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The others were Bishop Blase J. Cupich of Spokane, Wash., chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Child and Youth Protection; Bishop R. Daniel Conlon of Steubenville, Ohio, chairman-elect of the committee; and Diane

Knight, outgoing chair of the U.S. bishops' National Review Board.

Many other countries have not done the same kind of extensive research and study into the prevalence and causes of clergy sex abuse nor have they implemented the same kind of prevention programs, victim support groups and policies for dealing with allegations, the U.S. delegates said.

Bishop Conlon told CNS that by bringing in countries where there have been few if any allegations, "it will help them be prepared when they do receive allegations of abuse against children, which undoubtedly they will."

"Hopefully they can avoid some of the mistakes those of us who had to start this (process of response and prevention) have had to go through," Knight said.

Being aware that priests guilty of abuse will often deny the abuse or will display "the kinds of defense mechanisms" characteristic of many sex offenders is one of the most important lessons learned from the abuse crisis, Knight said.

Bishops and other church members, she said, will need to understand that "they can't take everything (the accused says) at face value."

Bishop Conlon said denial is also a problem at all levels of the church community, not just among perpetrators. For example, denial exists when church authorities don't investigate allegations or when parishioners say victims are simply seeking money through lawsuits or refuse to believe a clergy member was ever guilty, he said.

"We have a lot of work to do to in order to make sure the commitments we've made" to protect children and young people are fulfilled, he said.

The U.S. delegates said the church can play a unique role in helping protect children in countries where child protection laws are inadequate or where taboos and shame play so powerfully in a culture that victims don't step forward.

"Representatives from Third World countries have been saying that the church is actually taking a lead in confronting a culture of silence, a culture of male-dominance and a culture of minimalizing the rights of children, Bishop Conlon said.

The Anglophone conference lets nations which have made the most strides in implementing policies and prevention programs help the church in other countries by "giving them the courage and the tools to be able to take some leadership and making changes in the larger culture in their own countries," he said.

Even though research suggests that the bulk of clergy abuse in the United States occurred between the late 1960s and early 1980s, Knight said the church cannot ever let itself be "lulled into complacency."

There will always be adults who abuse children and education and prevention will always be needed, she said.

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