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Vatican: Sex abuse requires strong response

Sarah Delaney Catholic News Service | Jun. 20, 2011

VATICAN CITY -- The phenomenon of the sexual abuse of minors within the church requires a strong response that is "not inertia, a culture of silence or repression," said the Vatican's top investigator of clerical sex abuse said.

Msgr. Charles Scicluna, promoter of justice for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, said that the church must do all it can to respond to the problem and emphasize that protection of children is integral to the good of the universal church.

Msgr. Scicluna spoke at a news conference to present an upcoming symposium on sexual abuse that organizers hope will contribute to a "global culture" of transparency and commitment to keeping children and young people safe within the Catholic Church.

The symposium, to be held in Rome in February, will give bishops and other church leaders a chance to learn from experts the best practices learned over the last several years about sexual abuse of minors from psychological, juridical, sociologic and child-protection standpoints.

At the news conference June 18 at the Pontifical Gregorian University, where the symposium will be held, promoters explained that it was part of a long process to make reparations and undergo deep change in the wake of the scandal that has shaken the church.

Titled "Toward Healing and Renewal," the symposium will help bishops and religious orders comply with a recent circular letter from the doctrinal congregation. The letter requires each bishops' conference to submit a set of guidelines on how it deals with accusations of abuse and ministering to victims by May 2012.

The organizers also announced that an electronic database will include the most up-to-date information about the problem, including best practices from various bishops' congregations and the latest research regarding several aspects of the problem.

Msgr. Scicluna, the top investigator in matters of clerical abuse, said that while bishops and major superiors will not be obligated to follow the advice offered during the symposium, they would be "lacking in prudence" if they did not.

He said the letter from Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the congregation, had placed the responsibility for determining guidelines squarely with the bishops.

The procedures put in place "must be adequate to give a credible, transparent and accountable response to the very sad phenomenon of sexual abuse of minors," he said.

Msgr. Scicluna said increased awareness within the whole church community about the problem was the key to prevention among bishops, families and even children, to the extent their age allows them to understand. There

should be "an atmosphere where it is easy to recognize the abuse of power of an erotic nature," and "not only heal wounds, but prevent abuse," he said.

The problem of sexual abuse of minors requires a strong response, he said.

"Inertia is not a response, nor is a culture of silence or repression a response," he said.

Father Francois-Xavier Dumortier, rector of the Gregorian, said the symposium was planned because "everyone must commit themselves so that these things don't happen again." The Jesuit university wants to help the church act in a "timely, effective manner using all the means possible" to deal with sexual abuse, he said.

Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, director of the Vatican press office, said the symposium had been months in planning and that it was one of many steps "in a long process of renewal, healing and reconciliation." He said it was not just an event to counter accusations that the church has not done enough to root out the problem and pointed to the creation of the electronic database that will be available to all those who are trying to help on a long-term basis.

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