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Survivors' groups leave talks with church over abuse

Simon Caldwell Catholic News Service | Oct. 12, 2011

LONDON -- Two sex abuse survivors' groups have withdrawn from "exploratory talks" with the Catholic Church in England and Wales on ways to improve the pastoral response to victims of clerical sex abuse.

Representatives of Ministry and Clergy Sexual Abuse Survivors and the Lantern Project said Oct. 11 that they would no longer participate in negotiations with the Catholic Safeguarding Advisory Service, which oversees the protection of children and vulnerable adults in the Catholic Church in England and Wales, because the church was continuing to "deny justice" to victims.

"I can see no merit in continuing to deliberate with the Catholic Church ... while at the same time I am having to support victims who are being crushed by the Catholic Church in the courts," Graham Wilmer, founder of the Lantern Project, said in a letter to colleagues.

"I personally can no longer stomach the idea of being an active part of the illusion of goodness and understanding the church is trying to create, so I am withdrawing from this particular endeavor," he said.

Ministry and Clergy Sexual Abuse Survivors announced its decision at an Oct. 11 meeting between survivors' representatives and the advisory group in London.

In a press statement, MACSAS said it had withdrawn because of "the manner in which the talks have been conducted, the lack of any coherent purpose, aims or objectives, the manipulation of these talks in the media by the Catholic Church, and the failure of the Catholic Church to acknowledge the duty owed to the many thousands of victims of abuse perpetrated within the Catholic Church and its religious institutions in England and Wales."

MACSAS said its demands included the "acknowledgment of clergy and religious abuse victims as the primary responsibility of the church" and a "realistic budget for any proposed response to victims."

"None of these foundational principles have been accepted by the Catholic Church, therefore, we can no longer be part of these talks or any future working group that comes from them," the organization's statement said.

Adrian Child, director of the Catholic Safeguarding Advisory Service, said in an Oct. 12 statement to Catholic News Service that his organization had been in dialogue with abuse survivors groups for more than a year.

"The aim is to develop a sensitive and just response to survivors of abuse within a church setting in order to promote healing for victims of abuse," Child said.

"At yesterday's meeting, MACSAS announced their decision to no longer take part in these discussions," he said. "Regret was expressed by the group that they had made that decision, but the decision was respected, and they were thanked for their contribution to the work so far."

In response to the withdrawal, Chris Saltrese, a Catholic lawyer who represents people who say they have been

falsely accused of abuse, charged the survivors' groups of trying to bully the church into handing over money.

"The Catholic Church should not be held to ransom by groups whose main aim is unconditional surrender to compensation claims," Saltrese said in an Oct. 11 email to CNS.

"It creates a climate of fear that rebounds not only on conscientious clergy and the laity, but acts to the detriment of the community at large, leaving many pressing needs unmet," he said. "The whole focus of the Catholic Church on sexual abuse is disproportionate and should be scaled down to regain perspective."

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