

Report: Thousands abused by church personnel in Netherlands

Catholic News Service | Dec. 21, 2011

THE HAGUE, Netherlands -- A report on a Dutch inquiry said "several tens of thousands of minors" were sexually abused by Catholic Church personnel between 1945 and 2010, and it faulted church leaders for covering up the abuse and failing to help victims.

Dutch bishops and heads of religious orders expressed "shame and sorrow" at the revelations and pledged to "take all measures provided for under church and civil law" to prevent and punish such abuse in the future.

The report, issued Dec. 16, was the result of a lengthy independent inquiry requested by the Dutch bishops' conference and the Conference of Dutch Religious. The commission that conducted the study had access to church archives, and it received 1,795 specific reports of sexual abuse of minors in the church; it also conducted a survey to estimate the scale of abuse over the 65-year period.

The report estimated that between 10,000 and 20,000 children who spent part of their youth in a Catholic institution in the Netherlands suffered abuse by church personnel.

It estimated that about one in 10 Dutch children in residential institutions experienced unwanted sexual advances from a perpetrator working in the church. It noted that there was no significant difference between Catholic and non-Catholic institutions.

The report faulted bishops and other church officials for covering up cases of sexual abuse, for transferring perpetrators without punishment, for taking few preventative measures and for failing to give recognition, help and compensation to victims.

It called on bishops and superiors to give a public accounting of their actions. It said financial compensation is "an essential element of the reparation that must be made to the victims."

The report urged church officials to dialogue with victims and victim groups. It suggested naming a victims' contact person -- it suggested a bishop, in consultation with Dutch religious -- since many Dutch religious orders have declining and aging membership and, soon, some "will be so small that they will no longer be able to function as a contact point."

In a statement issued soon after the report was made public, the bishops and directors of the Conference of Dutch Religious said they were "shocked by the sexual abuse of minors and the practices described in the final report. It fills us with shame and sorrow."

They added that "the perpetrators are not the only ones to blame. Church authorities who did not act correctly and did not give priority to the interests of and care for these victims also share in this blame."

They also pledged that, in the future, church officials would notify civil authorities "when there is any suspicion of a punishable offense," in accordance with Dutch law.

The inquiry was led by Wim Deetman, a former Dutch education minister and former mayor of The Hague. Commission members said they based their findings on empirical data and used strict definitions of "sexual abuse," "position of authority" and "sexual contact." They also indicated they did not conduct legal investigations.

The study examined the information in light of the "social, cultural, economic and political developments that have occurred over the last 65 years in the Netherlands and the Roman Catholic Church." It looked at changes in the educational system -- the transition from boarding schools to day schools; the liberalization of sexual attitudes; and the government and church's change in legislation and guidelines concerning instances of sexual abuse of minors. However, the report said, putting the information into its proper context did not legitimize abuse.

In addition to analyzing accounts of church abuse, the commission surveyed more than 34,000 Dutch nationals age 40 or older and consulted with research and demographic institutions. It found that:

-- "Sexual abuse of minors occurs widely in Dutch society" and did not occur primarily within the Catholic Church.

-- "The abuse did not occur mainly in education institutions, although there does seem to have been a specific problem in relation to educational institutions."

The study said that, for decades, efforts to tackle the problems of clergy sexual abuse were aimed at managing those doing the abuse, and the commission found little evidence of help for victims. It criticized the admittance of seminarians with psychological problems and said that, in at least one religious order, there was "evidence that sexually inappropriate behavior toward members of the order may perhaps have been part of the internal monastic culture."

The commission criticized the lack of structures for reporting and dealing with abuse. It said police reports were "not part of the administrative repertoire of either the bishop or archbishop or the superior. This was left to the victims and their parents, who were certainly not encouraged to do so."

The report also said that, while there was no scientific evidence to support a common assertion that celibacy was the reason abuse occurs within the church, it also was not possible to conclude that there is no connection.

It examined the historical tensions between the Dutch church and the Vatican, especially on the issue of mandatory celibacy. In the 1960s, many Dutch bishops favored an end to the celibate priesthood, based in part on mental health experts who indicated celibacy "could make priests susceptible to various forms of inappropriate behavior," the report said.

It added that many who entered the seminary thought the celibacy requirement would be lifted and, when it was not, they left the priesthood. While Dutch church officials were "aware of structural explanations for the dramatic decline in the number of ordinations and the growing numbers leaving the priesthood, administrative bodies in Rome persisted in explaining it in terms of individuals, arguing for example, that those who left the priesthood had been unable to fulfill their vocation, had lost their idealism and were unable to cope with celibacy."

It said the Vatican restricted the intervention of mental health experts, leading to "greater reluctance among priests and religious to discuss psychological problems."

Source URL (retrieved on 01/28/2015 - 11:34): <http://ncronline.org/news/accountability/report-thousands-abused-church-personnel-netherlands>