

Pressure on Dutch church after report

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 3, 2012



During a news conference in Zeist, Netherlands, Dec. 16, Archbishop Wim Eijk, center, answers questions about a report on sexual abuse in the Dutch church. (AP Photo/Bas Czerwinski)

Two leading politicians in the Netherlands, both from conservative parties, have called for the resignations of Catholic bishops in the wake of a damning report on sexual abuse in the Dutch church.

The country's prime minister, Mark Rutte, also announced that his cabinet is considering lifting a statute of limitations to allow criminal prosecutions. A complaint has already been filed with the public prosecutor's office against a former bishop of the Rotterdam diocese, Philippe Bär. An attorney representing alleged victims has charged Bär with covering up abuse during his tenure from 1983 to 1993.

Meanwhile, an influential Catholic commentator in Italy has rejected suggestions that the revelations amount to an indictment of the liberal spirit of Dutch Catholicism following the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

Released on Dec. 16, the report found that somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 Dutch children suffered abuse by Catholic personnel, ranging from unwanted sexual advances to rape, during the period of 1945 to 2010. A commission sponsored by the Catholic bishops and religious orders of Holland produced the report.

On Dec. 17, Holland's deputy prime minister, Maxime Verhagen, himself a Catholic, said the church has been "profoundly damaged," and bishops should consider resigning. Verhagen is a member of the Christian Democratic Appeal Party, a center-right faction seen as friendly to the church.

Twelve days later, the leader of the Reformed Political Party, another conservative faction of Calvinist origins, argued on national television that a Catholic bishop should resign. Doing so, said Kees van der Staaij, would "send out a strong signal about how seriously the church takes the issue."

Bishop Gerard de Korte of the Groningen-Leeuwarden diocese told a Dutch newspaper, "None of the current bishops was personally involved, otherwise resignations would have been appropriate."

The commission studied 1,800 complaints involving the Catholic church, identifying 800 Catholic clergy, religious and lay workers accused of abuse. Roughly 105 are believed to still be alive.

The commission, led by a former government minister who's a Protestant, faulted Catholic leaders for a "failure of oversight" and said the vast majority of complaints were never reported to police.

Archbishop Wim Eijk of Utrecht, speaking on behalf of the Catholic church, said the report "fills us with shame and sorrow." A letter of apology was read at Masses across the country on Dec. 18, and the Dutch church has announced a compensation program for victims, with payments ranging from \$6,500 to \$130,000, depending on the kind of abuse suffered.

The report builds on what has already been an ugly year for the Dutch church, following a scandal that rocked the Salesian order.

In May, Dutch radio reported that a Salesian priest had been a board member of a lobbying group advocating sexual relationships between children and adults. The priest's superior, Salesian Fr. Herman Spronck, seemed to defend him, telling Dutch radio that "only in a few cases do children suffer harm" from these relationships.

The Salesians quickly removed Spronck from his position.

In Catholic circles, some commentators have posited a link between the revelations and the famously progressive climate in Dutch Catholicism after Vatican II. In mid-December, Italian writer Giacomo Galeazzi argued that "the "liberal" Catholic church is sinking as a result of the pedophilia scandal."

Fr. Enzo Bianchi, leader of the renowned Italian monastic community of Bose, and a figure with strong Vatican ties, has challenged those assertions.

In a Dec. 23 essay, Bianchi noted that more than 80 percent of the complaints identified in the Dutch report date to the period before Vatican II. Ideological speculation, Bianchi wrote, "doesn't help anyone ... certainly not the victims, and not the church."

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