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Vatican abuse summit: Prosecutor decries ëdeadly culture of silence'

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 8, 2012 NCR Today

ROME -- The Vatican?s top prosecutor on sex abuse cases today bluntly decried ?a deadly culture of silence? on clerical abuse, calling such denial ?in itself wrong and unjust.?

tMaltese Monsignor Charles Scicluna told participants in a Vatican summit on sex abuse that while the church now has clear laws to punish abusers, just having such laws on the books isn?t enough.

t?Our people need to know that the law is being applied,? he said. ?No strategy for the prevention of child abuse will ever work without commitment and accountability.?

tScicluna likewise reaffirmed the obligation of church leaders to cooperate with civil authorities, including reporting abuse allegations to police and prosecutors.

?Sexual abuse of minors is not just a canonical [violation] or a breach of a code of conduct internal to an institution, whether it be religious or other,? he said. ?It is also a crime prosecuted by civil law.?

As a result, Scicluna said, Catholic officials have ?the duty to cooperate with state authorities in our response to child abuse.?

tScicluna spoke as part of a four-day symposium on the sexual abuse crisis titled ?Towards Healing and Renewal?, which is being held at Rome?s Jesuit-run Gregorian University. It brings together roughly 100 bishops and religious superiors from around the world, in tandem with child protection experts.

tScicluna serves as the Promoter of Justice in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, a position he first took up under then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, today Pope Benedict XVI. In effect, that makes Scicluna the Vatican?s ?D.A.? on sex abuse cases; among other things, he was responsible for the investigation of the late Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, founder of the Legionaries of Christ, which led to a 2006 edict restricting Maciel to a life of ?prayer and penance.?

tScicluna?s address this morning pivoted on the moral and legal dimensions of the fight against child abuse.

?A deadly culture of silence or ?omertà? is in itself wrong and unjust,? he said.

?Other enemies of the truth are the deliberate denial of known facts, and the misplaced concern that the good name of the institution should somehow enjoy absolute priority to the detriment of legitimate disclosure of crime.?

tScicluna laid out five principles for thinking about the church?s responsibility to break that culture of silence:

- Truth implies a commitment to justice.
- Justice, based on truth, ?evokes a response from the individual?s conscience.?

- Respect for truth breeds confidence in the rule of law; ignoring the truth ?generates distrust and suspicion.?
- Rights must be protected, but in the context of concern for the common good.
- Respect for the law avoids ?pastoral? distortions of the law ? meaning, in part, reluctance to punish abusers.

tScicluna insisted that the church?s understanding of the common good must include the child welfare.

?Safety of children is a paramount concern for the church, and an integral part of its concept of the ?common good?,? he said.

tDiscussing the individual response to abuse, Scicluna stressed ?the radical need of the victim to be heard attentively, to be understood and believed, to be treated with dignity as he or she plods on the tiresome journey of recovery and healing.?

tAt the same time, he warned against what he called ?the limited phenomenon of some victims who refuse to move on in life, who seem to have indentified ?self? simply with ?having been victims?.?

?These fellow brothers and sisters of ours merit our special attention and care,? he said.

In remarks to the press, Scicluna clarified that point.

t?It?s unfair to expect that abuse by a priest should define the person? who suffered it, Scicluna said.?That would be a permanent form of abuse. [It would mean that] the harmful effect of what a minister of the church has done to them will remain with them forever.?

tThe experience of abuse, Scicluna said, ?does not define you. You are bigger, your dignity is greater, than the harm that has been done to you.?

tMonsignor Stephen Rossetti, an American expert on clerical sexual abuse, said that it?s important for the church ?to hear the anger? of victims, but also to help them in ?not being stuck? in that anger.

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