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Vatican abuse summit: 'We don't want to repeat U.S., Irish mistakes'

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 9, 2012 NCR Today

ROME -- Archbishop Luis Antonio Tagle of Manila in the Philippines spoke today at the ?Towards Healing and Renewal? symposium, a four-day summit at the sexual abuse crisis held at Rome?s Jesuit-run Gregorian University and cosponsored by a variety of Vatican departments. Tagle traced some features of Asian culture that make both the understanding of sexual abuse, and the church?s response to it, different from Western trajectories.

Tagle said that silence often surrounds the issue of sexual abuse in Asia, related to cultural notions of honor and shame, not just for oneself but also one?s family. He also suggested that some features of Asian Catholicity may facilitate abuse, such as an exalted understanding of a priest?s authority and spiritual status.

t Without denying that abuse of minors is a problem in Asia too, Tagle said that to date, there are relatively few reported cases ? less, he said, than clergy caught in illicit affairs with adult women. He also said that many victims of clerical abuse in Asia still prefer to handle the situation quietly, inside the church, as opposed to making a formal legal complaint with civil authorities.

tTagle, 54, sat down on the margins of the summit for an exclusive interview with NCR. It amounts to a window onto how a major Catholic community, in this case the world's third largest Catholic country in the Philippines, but one where the sexual abuse crisis has yet to erupt, is trying to get ahead of the curve.

The following is a transcript of the interview.

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Interview with Archbishop Luis Antonio Tagle
February 9, 2012

You said this morning that victims in Asia often prefer to handle abuse cases inside the church. To Westerners, that could sound as if you?re saying, ?Trust us,? when many people feel the church hasn?t earned that trust.

tYes, I fully understand. I understand the type of statement I made would not be easily understood or accepted by people who have suffered a lot because of the way church authorities in their countries or their continents have mishandled the whole issue. But, I cannot deny the fact that maybe in Asia, the church still enjoys a bit of trust, even among victims. They would rather try the church processes, the penal and judicial processes available in canon law, thinking that if they?re satisfied with that, they?re happy. For many, going public, in terms of media exposure or going to court ? aside from costing a lot of money, there?s a cultural element. For them, [going to the church] is not inaction, it?s handling it in the most discrete way possible.

You say that the church in Asia still enjoys some trust. Is it important to you not to lose that trust, by making sure these cases are taken seriously, so you don?t end up where the church in Ireland or the United States has been?

tI say ?Amen? to that. It is really important. The sad experiences in Ireland and the United States, and some other places, really have taught us a lesson. We see now more clearly, based on the trouble in Ireland especially, that swift action, compassion for victims, and making sure that the laws of the church are enforced and the guilty party is given the proper sanction, will keep the people?s trust in the church going.

What about sanctions for bishops who fail to take the proper action? Do you support stronger accountability for bishops?

tI think within the church, there are measures for that. The Holy See can take different actions, to reprimand a bishop or even to depose one who is amiss in his responsibilities.

Would you support the Holy See doing that?

tYes. It?s happened, and when it has happened, it?s restored peace in the communities. There have been cases when a bishop has been found guilty of failing in his responsibilities, and either removed from office or restricted in his ministry. People don?t rejoice, but they feel justice has been done.

tBy the way, as a proactive measure, the bishops of the Philippines have set up an office within the episcopal conference to address fellow bishops who are in difficult situations, so that we can guide and remind each other. It?s a kind of fraternal correction. When we reported that to the Holy See, they were quite pleasantly surprised, and they encouraged us to polish the job description of that committee. They said it?s not just the priest who needs correction when he becomes wayward, but bishops need it too.

What will this committee do?

tIt?s fairly new, but the idea is that it?s in charge of the ongoing formation of bishops. That covers a wide range of things, such as their basic human formation. We?ve already had one session, for example, on mid-life issues, facing retirement, even facing death. Within that broad scope, there?s the delicate task of handling disputes about a bishop. For instance, a priest, before going to the Apostolic Nuncio, could bring a grievance with the bishop to this committee. Of course, the final decision is with the Holy See, but that committee could help the bishop and could even help the Holy See if it asks it to do something for them.

Could a lay person bring a grievance?

tYes, yes, sure.

Looking at the United States, what do you make of the ?one strike? policy, meaning that a priest is permanently removed from ministry for life for even one act of sexual abuse?

tThis is still being debated in the Philippines. At least at the moment, it?s a debate on the level of psychology. We have some experts who say there is no such thing as an isolated case, while others say there could be lapses in one?s consciousness but the person is still intact. We?re still at that level, and the bishops are just listening to these experts. We?re aware of the debate.

At the moment, we?re trying to use what is available in canon law. It says that if there is a scandal, for example, caused by an offense against the sixth commandment, after establishing the veracity of the accusation, the bishop can suspend that priest?s faculties. That period of suspension can be used by analysis, evaluation, and treatment. While this psychological debate is raging, we?ll see if the result of that period of suspension and discernment indicates it?s really an isolated case and the man could eventually be reinstated.

We?ve had cases in the past, even before the eruption of this scandal worldwide, in which some priests who had

offended were given a second chance and turned out to be very good priests. We also had some failures, in which priests were given a second chance and failed miserably. So, the empirical experience is mixed too.

If the goal is absolute protection of children, doesn?t that mean not taking any chances?

tThat?s always the risk that you take. Right now, the leaning among the bishops in the Philippines is towards zero tolerance. But also, you find individual bishops who say ?We know this priest,? and they rely on their personal knowledge.

Are bishops making those decisions by themselves, or do they have lay boards of advisors?

tSome dioceses have mechanisms such as lay advisory boards, but in other cases it?s just a group of priests and religious. It varies diocese by diocese.

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