

U.N. faults U.S. for failure to prosecute abusive clerics

Caleb Bell Religion News Service | Feb. 21, 2013
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The U.S. is failing to pursue and prosecute clergy guilty of child sexual abuse, according to a recent United Nations committee report.

The U.N.'s Committee on the Rights of the Child, in a little-noticed Jan. 25 report, urged the U.S. to "take all necessary measures to investigate all cases of sexual abuse of children whether single or on a massive and long-term scale, committed by clerics."

The U.S. Department of Justice did not return requests for comment, and the National Association of Attorneys General declined to comment. Abuse cases are typically handled by local and state prosecutors, not the federal government.

Child abuse scandals have rocked various Christian and Jewish institutions throughout the U.S. in recent years, with the Catholic Church's clergy abuse scandal that erupted in 2002 the most visible.

Earlier this month, Archbishop Jose Gomez of Los Angeles stripped retired Cardinal Roger Mahony of his public duties after a court-ordered release of church documents showed that Mahony and others tried to shelter abusive priests from prosecution.

David Clohessy, the director of Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, described national efforts to deal with child-molesting clergy as "woefully inadequate."

"There has been and continues to be too cozy a relationship between religious and governmental figures," Clohessy said. "Other than a handful of local prosecutors, there's been almost no action at the state or federal level."

Clohessy said his group believes that if prosecutors were to target church leaders rather than individual priests, the problem would be solved much faster.

"If even a handful of bishops went to jail for enabling child sex crimes, we believe that that would introduce massive reform," Clohessy said. "Predator priests would be caught after their third victim, not 33rd victim."

Last year, Bishop Robert Finn of Kansas City, Mo., was convicted of failing to report an abusive priest, and a leading churchman in Philadelphia received three to six years in prison for shuffling known abusers across the archdiocese.

Sr. Mary Ann Walsh, spokeswoman for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said the hierarchy does a "huge amount" in order to prevent sex abuse within the church -- much of it learned after the abuse scandal came to light.

"Every diocese is audited every year to see that every year that parishes have safe environment programs,"

Walsh said, "which include educating children so that they are aware of inappropriate contact by an adult, and are encouraged to report anything that makes them uncomfortable to a trusted adult."

Some victims' advocates have criticized Pope Benedict XVI's handling of sex abuse scandals during his reign, as well as before his election when he headed the Vatican department responsible for processing abuse cases.

The pope, for health reasons, will resign Feb. 28, and some are now urging Mahony -- who is eligible to vote for the next pope -- to stay in the U.S. and not vote for his role in trying to shield known abusers from criminal prosecution.

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