

Vatican to form commission on abuse

Joshua J. McElwee | Dec. 16, 2013

Vatican City

When Pope Francis announced in April that he would convene a sort of "kitchen cabinet" of the world's cardinals, he gave the group two general objectives: to help him in reforming the Vatican's bureaucracy and to advise him in governing the global church.

While we are still waiting to see exactly where pursuit of the first goal will lead, December's meeting of the Council of Cardinals saw the group embracing the second.

As the council wrapped up its second meeting at the Vatican Dec. 5, the group's lone American, Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley, announced that Francis was creating, at the cardinals' recommendation, a new commission that would advise the pope on safeguarding children from sexual abuse.

O'Malley said at a press briefing that the commission is to comprise international experts and to focus on the pastoral aspect of the continuing clergy sexual abuse crisis. The pope has not determined the specifics of how the commission will function or where it will fit into the Vatican's bureaucracy, he said.

"Up to now, there's been so much focus on the judicial parts of this, but the pastoral response of the church is very, very important and the Holy Father is concerned about that," O'Malley said. "And so we feel as though having the advantage of a commission of experts that would be able to study some of these issues and bring concrete recommendations for the Holy Father and the Holy See will be very important."

The group, O'Malley said, is to include priests, men and women religious, and laypeople.

"All those who are experts in the work of safeguarding children and all those who have been taking care of children" will be considered to serve on the commission, he said.

The cardinals' council, which includes prelates from six continents, met at the Vatican Dec. 3-5. The group met for the first time Oct. 1-3. Honduran Cardinal Óscar Rodríguez Maradiaga serves as its coordinator.

Announcement of the new commission came amid news earlier in December that the Vatican had refused to provide information requested by the U.N. Committee on the Rights of the Child about how the church handles investigations into sexual abuse by priests.

Responding to a July inquiry by the U.N. committee, the Vatican said cases of sexual abuse by priests were primarily the responsibility of the world's individual bishops.

Asked by NCR Dec. 5 if the new commission would be responsible for making suggestions to the pope on how to handle bishops who shield priest abusers or fail to follow church laws and guidelines on abuse, O'Malley said he did not know.

"That's something that the church needs to address," he said, but added that he did not know if it would be addressed by the new commission, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, or the Congregation for Bishops.

One of the former leaders of the U.S. bishops' lay group to monitor sexual abuse policies, Judge Michael Merz, said in a phone interview Dec. 9 that if the new Vatican commission wants to be seen as effective, it must be made up of people who have deep experience in responding to clergy sexual abuse.

"I hope that this won't just be another Vatican congregation of bishops who put on another hat," said Merz, a federal district court judge in Ohio who served as chair of the U.S. bishops' National Review Board from 2007 to 2009.

"It's such a complex thing," he said. "It takes a while to get your feet wet and they have to get wet up to the knees. So it should be people with experience."

Among the responsibilities O'Malley said the new commission would have is studying present child-safeguarding programs "to come up with suggestions for new initiatives" on the part of the Vatican in collaboration with the world's bishops and leaders of religious orders.

The commission, O'Malley said, will also evaluate current and suggest new guidelines for protection of children, programs of priestly formation, safe environment protocols, and codes of personal conduct.

The new commission, however, will not handle prosecution of clergy suspected of sexual abuse, O'Malley said. That responsibility will remain with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which was given that job in 2001 by Pope John Paul II.

The Vatican said the group of eight cardinals also used its December meeting to evaluate the offices of the church's central bureaucracy "one by one" and was pursuing wide revisions in their functioning.

The objective, Vatican spokesman Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi said at a press briefing Dec. 3, "is not to make small changes ... but a consistent and in-depth revision" of the central bureaucracy, known as the Roman Curia.

Among the offices Lombardi said the cardinals have evaluated so far are those concerned with the church's liturgical celebrations, the process of declaring people saints, and the evangelization of peoples.

"They are just making a first round in tackling all of the topics before going in depth," Lombardi said at a briefing Dec. 4. The cardinals, he said, want to look "at the general picture before going into the details."

The Vatican has said the group's third meeting will come Feb. 17-19 in Rome followed by an as-yet-unscheduled meeting of the full body of the approximately 200 cardinals around the world.

On Dec. 3, Lombardi said he expects the eight cardinals might give some sort of report on their work to the full body of cardinals then.

At least one top Vatican official said Dec. 4 he was still waiting to see exactly what the coming reforms mean for his work.

Archbishop Pietro Parolin, who took over as the Vatican's secretary of state Oct. 15, said the pope and the cardinals' group have made clear they are looking at reforms to his office, which has typically controlled both

the diplomatic and political functions of the Vatican.

"I don't know if it's a different name or if they want to give it a new structure," Parolin told members of the press on the sidelines of a book release event a few blocks east of St. Peter's Basilica. ([See related story \[1\].](#))

"The important thing is for it to become a structure that is at the service of the pope as it has always been, but that it can be enhanced," he said.

Like Catholics around the world, it seems even the most powerful church officials are wondering exactly how Francis and his "kitchen cabinet" will change the Vatican.

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