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UN report criticizes Vatican child protection record

Brian Roewe | Feb. 5, 2014

A United Nations watchdog group for children?s rights chastised the Vatican Wednesday for a series of substandard policies that fall short in protecting children, specifically from sexual abuse.

The condemnation came from the U.N. Committee on Convention of the Rights of the Child, which is made up of 18 independent experts that monitor the implementation of the 1989 U.N. treaty -- ratified by the Vatican in 1990 -- related to child protection and children?s rights.

While it welcomed the Vatican?s recent ?open and constructive dialogue? and the Vatican?s willingness ?to change attitudes and practices? related to child protection, the committee noted that the Vatican?s response to the U.N. body came ?with a considerable delay? of 14 years. The U.N. committee said that most of its recommendations following its initial 1995 review had not fully addressed.

Though the latest U.N. report addresses a range of issues, such as the Vatican?s use of discriminatory terms like ?illegitimate children,? or its handling of children born of priests, the U.N. child?s rights committee held its ?deepest concern? for the sexual abuse of children by Catholic clergy, estimating that clergy have ?been involved in the sexual abuse of tens of thousands of children worldwide.

[**Read the full U.N. report here** **[1]**]

?The Committee is gravely concerned that the Holy See has not acknowledged the extent of the crimes committed, has not taken the necessary measures to address cases of child sexual abuse and to protect children, and has adopted policies and practices which have led to the continuation of the abuse by and the impunity of the perpetrators,? the report said.

Particular areas it highlighted included:

- The practice of offender mobility, where ?well-known child sexual abusers have been transferred from parish to parish or to other countries in an attempt to cover-up such crimes,? which has kept such priests in contact with children, placing minors in many countries ?at high risk of sexual abuse?;
- A continued practice of withholding data on child sexual abuse cases;
- A practice of instituting disciplinary measures to abusers in secrecy, which has ?allowed the vast majority of abusers and almost all those who concealed child sexual abuse to escape judicial proceedings in States where abuses were committed?;
- A code of silence for all members of clergy that has prevented a majority of child sex abuse cases from being reported to law enforcement where the abuse occurred;
- Reporting to law enforcement that ?has never been made compulsory? and that ?in many cases, Church authorities, including at the highest levels of the Holy See have shown reluctance and in some instances, refused to cooperate with judicial authorities and national commissions of inquiry?;
- Limited efforts that have been made "to empower children enrolled in Catholic schools and

institutions to protect themselves from sexual abuse."

In its recommendations, the committee urged the Vatican to ?immediately remove all known and suspected child sexual abusers from assignment and refer the matter to the relevant law enforcement authorities for investigation and prosecution purposes.?

Other recommendations included:

- ensuring the recently announced sexual abuse commission -- announced in December by Pope Francis and to be housed in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith -- will investigate independently all cases of child sexual abuse and the conduct of church leaders involved;
- ensuring transparent sharing of its all its archives; amending canon law to make child sexual abuse a crime and remove all provisions requiring secrecy related to allegations;
- establishing ?clear rules, mechanisms and procedures for the mandatory reporting of all suspected cases of child sexual abuse and exploitation to law enforcement authorities? and ensuring all religious and church personnel are aware of their reporting obligations, ?that in cases of conflict ? prevail over Canon law provisions?;
- developing programs and policies to prevent child sexual abuse and to help victims in recovery.

The committee noted that when addressing allegations of child sex abuse, the church ?has consistently placed the preservation of the reputation of the Church and the protection of the perpetrators above children?s best interests.? It urged the Vatican to implement policies at all levels of authority to make the best interests of the child a primary consideration.

In a press statement [2], the Vatican said it would study and examine the report (which is non-binding and unenforceable by the committee).

?The Holy See reiterates its commitment to defending and protecting the rights of the child, in line with the principles promoted by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and according to the moral and religious values offered by Catholic doctrine,? the statement said.

In an interview with Vatican Radio [3] Wednesday, Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, the Vatican?s permanent observer to the U.N. who had testified before the U.N. committee on Jan. 16, said its findings ?point out a rather negative approach to what the Holy See has been doing and has already achieved in the area of the protection of children.?

Tomasi said the report appeared not up to date since the discussions he and the Vatican delegation had with the committee in mid-January. At that hearing, which marked the first time Vatican officials defended its handling of abuse scandals before an independent body, Tomasi reiterated the church?s commitment to reform its policies and practices on sexual abuse.

The Vatican also took issue with portions of the report that addressed abortion and contraception, calling it ?an attempt to interfere with Catholic Church teaching on the dignity of the human person and in the exercise of religious freedom.?

Responding to the report?s recommendation that the church review its abortion position and amend canon law to allow the procedure under specific circumstances, Tomasi told Vatican Radio, ?This is a contradiction with the principle of life that the convention itself should support recommending that children be protected before and after birth. If a child is eliminated or killed we can no longer talk about rights for this person.?

The report also recommended the Vatican assess its teachings on contraception and sexuality, and review its

past statements on homosexuality that the committee said contribute to social stigmatization and violence toward lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender children, and those raised by same-sex couples. In addition, it urged the Vatican ?to make full use of its moral authority to condemn all forms of harassment, discrimination or violence against children based on their sexual orientation or the sexual orientation of their parents.?

Outside of sexual abuse, the committee gave the Vatican poor marks in its promotion of gender equality and child trafficking, specifically noting the Magdalene laundries in Ireland. It also urged the church to explicitly oppose and to amend canon law to eliminate all forms of corporal punishment in child development.

The U.N. committee requested the Vatican submit its next report for review by September 2017.

In a statement, the Survivors Network for those Abused by Priests called the report ?a wakeup call,? not for church officials but for those in law enforcement to investigate possible clergy sexual abuse and cover ups, and where applicable, prosecute church supervisors. They echoed the call for Pope Francis to immediately remove all offenders from ministry and ?harshly punish? supervisors and peers who enabled the crimes.

?For the safety of children, we hope every head of state on the planet reads this and acts on it,? said Barbara Blaine, SNAP president.

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Editor's Note: *A previous version of this article stated the papal sex abuse commission was announced in January. It was announced in December, and a month later, Vatican officials indicated it would be housed in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.*

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