

UN, Vatican scrutinized following child abuse report

Brian Roewe | Feb. 11, 2014

In the wake of last week's critical U.N. report on Vatican child protection efforts has come more criticism, though much of it is directed not toward the church but the international body.

The critiques aimed at the recommendations from the U.N. Committee on the Rights of the Child ranged from sloppy to lacking focus or updated information.

In addressing the report Friday, saying it "has aroused extensive reaction and response," Vatican spokesman Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi [said the report](#) [1] doesn't represent confrontation between the two bodies, and that the church remains committed to the 1989 treaty (formally the Convention on the Rights of the Child) it ratified a year later.

Still, he saw "grave limitations" in the latest recommendations: a perceived lack of understanding of the Holy See's nature; possible influence from church-critical NGOs; and apparent exclusion of information the Vatican gave the committee during a recent meeting in Geneva.

"They have not taken adequate account of the responses, both written and oral, given by the representatives of the Holy See," he told Vatican Radio, suggesting that much of the report was likely written before the Vatican's Jan. 16 hearing.

The Vatican's permanent observer to the U.N. in Geneva, Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, made a similar observation, saying the report did not take into account recent efforts at the Vatican and within individual episcopal conferences.

"It therefore lacks a correct and updated perspective, which in reality has seen a series of changes for the protection of children that, it seems to me, are difficult to find, at the same level of commitment, in other institutions or even in other States," Tomasi [told Vatican Radio](#) [2] Thursday.

The Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests [dismissed](#) [3] such claims as attempts to "shoot the messenger" and divert attention.

But others outside the Vatican have raised similar issues, noting that nowhere does the report mention that Pope Benedict XVI had removed nearly 400 priests between 2011 and 2012, news that broke a day after the child rights hearing. Also not mentioned in the report was the May 2011 abuse guidelines (among them, follow civil reporting laws; restrict public ministry and/or contact with minors for offending clerics) sent to all bishops, who were ordered to send their revised policies to Rome for review.

On the issue of zero tolerance, an attorney who attended the Geneva hearing, Pamela Spees of the Center for Constitutional Rights, told *NCR* that the committee members attempted to probe the Vatican about how such policies held people accountable, but that it received little answer.

“They may not have mentioned the words “zero tolerance” in the report but they certainly were aware of what processes have been in place and what the problems of those processes are. And the fact of the matter is the situation has not fundamentally changed,” she said.

Without actual accountability for people in charge, she said, “the policies that exist have no teeth.”

In contrast to the criticism, Spees expressed gratitude that the committee “understood the scope and magnitude of the problem,” which she said extends beyond abusive clergy to a system that enables such crimes. She particularly noted it served as a moment of vindication for victims, recognizing the concerns they have raised for years.

The Center for Constitutional Rights, along with SNAP, filed a joint report to the child rights committee; in June, the International Criminal Court [denied](#) [4] an attempt by the groups to bring crimes against humanity charges against the Vatican related to the clergy sex abuse crisis.

One expert on the sex abuse crisis read the report as “neither totally fair nor unfair.” Kathleen McChesney served as the first head of the U.S. bishops’ conference’s child protection office, and her consulting firm is currently reviewing clergy files of the St. Paul-Minneapolis archdiocese. She said the assessment “fairly noted the Holy See’s willingness to change attitudes and practices” related to child protection, and recapped missteps taken by some church officials; on the other hand, it didn’t acknowledge the complexities of integrating a broad Vatican policy into countries where civil laws on child abuse often differ greatly.

The U.N. report urged the Vatican to establish clear reporting rules and to ensure all individuals working for the church “are made aware of their reporting obligations.”

“In a perfect world you would always do that, but it isn’t a perfect world, and some countries don’t have the kinds of child protective laws that we do in the English-speaking countries,” McChesney said, identifying the yet-to-be-appointed papal sex abuse commission as a body that could lead the way in addressing the inconsistencies.

Other aspects of the report garnering criticism pertained to its lack of focus.

In [The New York Times Tuesday](#) [5], Paul Vallely, a director of the U.K.-based *Tablet*, said that the report’s inclusion of culture war issues weakened its strong calls for action and diverts attention from the key question: Is the church doing enough on abuse?

“What the United Nations report made clear is that to restore public faith in the church on this issue the pope must make reporting of offenders to the local police mandatory -- and be prepared to discipline any bishop who fails to comply,” he said. “The sad irony is that the attack on wider Catholic values may have amplified the voices inside the Vatican of those who are advising him not to opt for full public transparency.”

Even the National Survivor Advocates Coalition, a U.S.-based victims advocacy group -- which described the report as a big break for victims in that it called out the church on a global scale for placing its reputation before children -- noted how the added “hot button issues” could pull some of the report’s punch.

“What the UN Committee did was open the drawbridge on the moat it sought to create through the Protection of the Child Treaty and allow the Vatican to scream -- and be heard -- on the cries of bias, discrimination, and interference in its internal religious affairs,” said chairwoman Kristine Ward on the [association’s website](#) [6].

“One has to wonder why the UN Committee chose to step into these low-lying religious-fruit arenas when it

left out concern for children and what the Vatican could do through both its more-than bully pulpit and its nuncio structure, she said.

But Spees said the committee's parameters for protecting children extend beyond sexual abuse, making it necessary to address areas such as reproductive rights and discrimination in the report.

Their responsibility is broader than sexual violence; they are responsible for monitoring compliance with multiple obligations of the treaty, so they did not overextend themselves. They are doing what they do with any other state, she said.

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[1] <http://www.news.va/en/news/fr-lombardi-note-on-un-holy-see-child-rights-commi>

[2] <http://www.news.va/en/news/archbishop-tomasi-the-holy-see-will-respond-to-the>

[3] http://www.snapnetwork.org/vatican_attacks_un_panel

[4] <http://ncronline.org/news/accountability/international-criminal-court-declines-pursue-crimes-against-humanity-case>

[5] http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/12/opinion/vatican-missteps-and-un-blunders.html?hpw&ref=opinion&_r=0

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