

Pope Francis criticized for defensive comments on abuse scandal

David Gibson Religion News Service | Mar. 7, 2014

The Vatican is trying to reassure Catholics and the public that Pope Francis takes the clerical sex abuse crisis seriously in the wake of defensive comments Francis made this week, the first serious bump in the road for a pope approaching the first anniversary of his election with sky-high approval ratings.

In an interview published Wednesday with an Italian newspaper, Francis was asked about the scandal that has shaken the faith of many Catholics, especially in the U.S., and why he hasn't fought back against criticisms of the church's record.

Francis began by acknowledging that "the cases of abuse are terrible because they leave very profound wounds," but he then shifted to praise the policies on abuse instituted by his predecessor, Benedict XVI, while asserting that the Catholic Church has "advanced a lot, perhaps more than anyone" in battling the sexual abuse of children.

"The Catholic Church is perhaps the only public institution that moved with transparency and responsibility," the pope continued, arguing that most abuse occurs in the home or other community environments. "No one else did as much. And yet, the church is the only one being attacked."

That prompted a torrent of criticism from victims advocates and others who noted that Francis did not apologize for the abuse, has not disciplined any bishops who covered up for abusers and has yet to meet with any abuse victims or name any members to a commission he promised to establish three months ago.

"His comments reflect an archaic, defensive mindset," said Barbara Dorris of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, or SNAP.

"He is triumphalist about clergy abuse of children and silent about the complicity of bishops," said Terence McKiernan, head of BishopAccountability.org.

"Hearing the Pope use the abuse-occurs-elsewhere excuse is truly disheartening," said the U.S.-based church reform group Voice of the Faithful, echoing a sense of disappointment among many Catholics who hoped the pope's pledges and moves to reform the church on many levels would extend to an examination of conscience on clergy abuse.

A Pew Research Center survey of American Catholics last year showed that 70 percent thought addressing abuse should be the top priority for the new pope, but in a follow-up report released this week only 54 percent gave Francis high marks for addressing it.

Vatican officials seem to be aware of the danger the crisis poses for Francis. The pope's spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, sent an email to The Associated Press saying it was taking time to set up the abuse commission in part because the pontiff was busy with other reforms. But he said that experts had been contacted

to check their availability and that this remained a priority for Francis.

"I'm waiting for it (the commission)," Lombardi wrote. "And I hope that the commission will also be able to propose to the pope initiatives adapted to give a true broad impulse in the church for the active protection of minors."

Apparently referring to a United Nations report last month that was sharply critical of the Vatican's record on abuse — but which itself was widely criticized for exaggerated claims and overstepping its mandate — Lombardi said the pope was pointing out that the Vatican's efforts have "not been recognized objectively."

"At the same time," Lombardi added, "it is clear that there is still an immense task to do for the past, for the present and, even more so, for the future. The pope knows this well."

Some critics held out hope that Francis would act soon and that the penitential season of Lent would be a spur.

The editors of *National Catholic Reporter* [wrote an open letter to the pope](#) [1] Thursday recalling that Francis captivated the public shortly after his election when he broke with tradition by going to a youth detention center for a Holy Thursday ritual before Easter, at which he washed the feet of a dozen young people, including two women and a Muslim.

"We implore you to turn the world's focus this Holy Thursday on a healing service for victims of sexual abuse by priests," the editors wrote. "Listen to their stories. Wash their feet."

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