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Victims demand action as Vatican abuse panel gets down to work

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As Pope Francis prepares to address the new Vatican panel charged with tackling the clergy sexual abuse scandal, victims are demanding the Catholic church take immediate action to expose perpetrators and punish the bishops who protected them.

The Vatican's new commission for the protection of minors, led by Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley, is designed to show the pope's personal commitment to confront the sex scandals that have shaken the church in the United States, Ireland, Germany and elsewhere around the world.

The eight-member commission [1], including Irish victim Marie Collins, who says she was raped by a priest at age 13, will meet for the first time Thursday at the Santa Marta residence where the pope lives inside the walls of the Vatican.

But the Chicago-based Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP) said Wednesday that church panels in the past had done nothing to expose or prevent abuse, and it called for a new approach.

"SNAP contends that these panels -- or panel members -- have both the chance and the duty to take action now to expose and deter cover-ups," said Barbara Blaine, founder and president of SNAP, which represents 18,000 victims from 79 countries who claim to have suffered clerical sexual abuse.

"The best way to do that ... is to rebuke the most serious and blatant 'enablers,' the church supervisors who endanger kids by protecting predators and keeping secrets.

"The panel should also urge bishops to fight for, not against, reforming secular child safety laws, like the archaic, predatory-friendly statutes of limitations."

In February, a United Nations panel in Geneva accused the church of continuing to protect pedophile priests [2] and urged church leaders to turn them over to law enforcement authorities. The U.N. Committee on the Rights of the Child said that "tens of thousands of children worldwide" had been raped or molested in the past and that abuse was continuing today.

While Francis recently asked for forgiveness for the "evil" damage caused by abusive priests and foreshadowed sanctions, he rejected the findings of the U.N. panel [3] and insisted the church had acted with "transparency and responsibility" on the issue.

Next week, the Vatican will face fresh scrutiny [4] as another U.N. committee looks into whether the church's approach to child protection violates the U.N. Convention Against Torture. The Holy See ratified the treaty in 2002.

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