

UN panel attacks Vatican over sexual abuse policies

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A United Nations panel has accused the Vatican of protecting itself rather than victims of sexual abuse, and it called on the Holy See to create an “independent mechanism” to investigate new charges of abuse.

The 16-page report issued February 5 by the Committee on the Rights of the Child accused the Vatican of “systematically” adopting policies that allowed priests to rape and molest thousands of young people over a span of decades. It also called on the church to remove known or suspected abusers from its ranks immediately.

“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.

The UN panel also criticized the Vatican for its views on contraception, homosexuality, and abortion—even suggesting that the church should allow abortions for pregnant girls whose lives and health are at risk, according to the *New York Times*.

On those points, the Vatican press office assailed the UN’s “attempt to interfere” with Catholic teaching and religious freedom. A spokesperson for the U.S. Catholic bishops said in a blog post that the report was “weakened” by including its stances on culture war issues.

The report’s assertive stance on the Vatican’s policies toward pedophile priests and other alleged perpetrators of sexual abuse was not surprising. Nearly a month earlier the UN committee had grilled Vatican officials for a full day as part of its investigation.

At that time, Monsignor Charles Scicluna, a former abuse prosecutor with the Holy See, told the UN panel in Geneva that more had to be done to confront the abuse scandal, but he also insisted the Vatican could do little to confront the issue worldwide because of its limited jurisdiction.

“The Holy See gets it,” said Scicluna, now a bishop in Malta. “Let’s not say it is or is not too late. There are clearly certain things that must be done differently in the future.”

The latest development could put new pressure on Pope Francis to take a strong stand on the issue. In December, Francis said he would create a special commission to study sexual abuse accusations and come up with ways to confront the problem, but few details have been released and the area remains one in which the wildly popular pontiff has drawn fire from critics.

Barbara Blaine, president of SNAP, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, praised the UN committee for taking an uncompromising stand. “The more international bodies and local governments step up, the sooner we can end the Vatican’s practices, including cover-ups, that continue to result in the rape of children and vulnerable adults in the church,” Blaine said.

Katherine Gallagher, a senior staff attorney at the New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights, which worked with SNAP to push the abuse issue in front of the UN panel, said “the international community is finally holding the Vatican accountable for its role in enabling and perpetuating sexual violence in the church.”

While the UN has no ability to enforce its findings or recommendations on the Vatican, Gallagher’s office said that as a signer of the 1990 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child the Holy See is obligated to meet the treaty obligations.

The Vatican has contended that it has limited jurisdiction over its bishops and priests worldwide and is responsible for implementing the UN agreement only within the small Vatican City—but the panel was openly skeptical. The panel asked the Vatican to report back in 2017.

In a Geneva news conference February 5, Kirsten Sandberg, chairwoman of the UN panel, said, “We think it is a horrible thing that is being kept silent both by the Holy See itself and in the different local parishes.” —RNS/added sources