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# U.N. report criticizes blind eye by Vatican

In a hard-hitting report applauded by victims as a landmark in the Roman Catholic Church's clerical sexabuse scandal, a U.N. committee on Wednesday called on the Vatican to remove all child abusers from its ranks, report them to law enforcement and open the church's archives so that bishops and other officials who concealed crimes could be held accountable.

The report, issued by the U.N. Committee on the Rights of the Child, is likely to put pressure on Pope Francis to make concrete changes in the way the church handles abuse cases and put some muscle into the commission on abuse that he announced in December, whose members and mission have not yet been specified.

The Vatican responded Wednesday that it had already made many of the changes called for in the report, and that the report's conclusions were out of date.

The report, however, was harshly critical of the church's current practices, not just those of the past.

"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 concluded.

The criticism came from a panel that examined the Vatican's compliance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, an international agreement signed by 140 sovereign entities, including the Vatican. The panel held a hearing on the issue last month, the first time the Vatican faced public examination by an international body of its record on sexual abuse, and heard testimony from Bishop Charles J. Scicluna, the Vatican's chief prosecutor of sexual abuse cases until 2012, who told the panel that "the Holy See gets it."

The report addressed issues far beyond child sexual abuse, taking the Vatican to task for its opposition to contraception, homosexuality, and abortion in cases of child rape and incest. The committee even suggested that the church amend its canon laws to permit abortions for pregnant girls whose lives and health are at risk.

But the Vatican press office said in a statement that it regretted to see the U.N. committee "attempt to interfere" with Catholic teaching and the church's "exercise of religious freedom."

Sister Mary Ann Walsh, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said in a blog post that the report was "weakened" by the panel's decision to include objections to Catholic teaching on culture war issues.

On the many pressing problems related to child welfare, the report recommended specific steps it said the Vatican should take: Stop obstructing efforts by victims' advocates in some countries to extend statutes of limitations, which now allow most abusers to escape prosecution; stop insisting that victims sign confidentiality agreements swearing them to silence as a condition for receiving compensation; help birth parents locate children who were taken from them for adoption out of Catholic institutions like the Magdalene Laundries in Ireland; and identify, count and financially support children fathered by Catholic priests without imposing confidentiality agreements on the mothers.



**Kirsten Sandberg**, the chairwoman of the U.N. panel, said Wednesday at a news conference in Geneva that tens of thousands of children around the world had suffered abuse by priests.

"We think it is a horrible thing that is being kept silent both by the Holy See itself and in the different local parishes," she said.

The panel rejected the church's key contention that the Vatican has no jurisdiction over its bishops and priests around the world, and is responsible for implementing the Convention on the Rights of the Child only within the tiny territory of Vatican City. By ratifying the convention, the panel said, the Vatican took responsibility for making sure it was respected by individuals and institutions under the Holy See's authority around the world.

The panel's report on the Vatican's treatment of children, its first in 14 years, called on the church to report back on its progress in 2017. Although the panel's recommendations are not binding, Sandberg said it expected Francis and the Holy See to act on them.

Barbara Dorris of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, or SNAP, who was abused by a priest as a child, said the report was "long overdue."

"It is wonderful that the U.N. has spoken so clearly about what the Vatican has done — and what it has failed to do," said Dorris, who is based in St. Louis. "To us, it is a call for the civil authorities to step in. Church officials have proved they cannot police themselves."

But Ashley McGuire of The Catholic Association, a lay organization founded to help defend the church in the news media, called the report a "stunning and misguided attack" that "overlooks the fact that the Catholic Church is the leading advocate for women and children and human rights in general around the world," on issues like sex trafficking and child hunger.