

Abuse victims seek investigation of pope, top Vatican officials

THE HAGUE, Netherlands – Several victims of clerical sexual abuse, a U.S.-based organization for survivors and a U.S.-based human rights organization formally asked the International Criminal Court to investigate Pope Benedict XVI and other top Vatican officials on charges they bear a responsibility for the abuse of children by Catholic priests around the world.

The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests and their attorneys from the Center for Constitutional Rights, a New York-based organization, presented their petition to the court Sept. 13, they announced in a press release.

The Vatican press office declined comment.

The petition alleges that “Vatican officials tolerate and enable the systematic and widespread concealing of rape and child sex crimes throughout the world.”

Along with the petition, the groups filed thousands of pages of documents, including Vatican policies on handling clerical sexual abuse; correspondence from Vatican officials, bishops and accused priests in reference to several specific cases; and copies of reports and policies from individual bishops’ conferences in several countries.

The petition claims the church leaders who bear “the greatest responsibility” for cases of clerical sexual abuse are Pope Benedict, both as pope and as the previous prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith; Cardinal Angelo Sodano, dean of the College of Cardinals and former Vatican secretary of state; Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, secretary of state and former secretary of the doctrinal congregation; and Cardinal William J. Levada, current prefect of the congregation.

The press release said the International Criminal Court recognizes “rape, sexual violence, assault and torture as crimes against humanity. It also provides for individual criminal liability for those with command or superior responsibility over those who directly commit such crimes.”

The court is a treaty-based tribunal founded by member states to bring to justice those who commit the most serious crimes of concern to the international community. It is not part of the U.N. system, although it has accepted cases referred by the United Nations.

The Holy See is not one of the court's 117 member states and the court claims no jurisdiction over states that are not members, although it could possibly act because the actual cases of abuse occurred in member states, such as Canada, Ireland and Germany. The United States is not a member of the court.

In their press release, the parties filing the petition said, "This could be the first time that an international court asserts jurisdiction over the Vatican for crimes committed by its agents worldwide."