

Accountability critical for sex abuse prevention, says Vatican official

VATICAN CITY - Child abuse prevention policies will never work without accountability and an unwavering commitment to children's welfare, said the Vatican's top investigator of clerical sex abuse.

"No strategy for the prevention of child abuse will ever work without commitment and accountability," especially from the world's bishops, said Monsignor Charles Scicluna, promoter of justice for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The monsignor was one of three Vatican officials invited to speak about protection strategies at an international forum on preventing child abuse. Cardinal Renato Martino, retired president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, and Archbishop Zygmunt Zimowski, head of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Ministry, were also invited to speak at the forum, "The World's Children and the Abuse of Their Rights," at the Italian senate Nov. 3.

The forum was sponsored by the U.S. National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in Alexandria, Va., the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., the Vatican-related Bambino Gesù Children's Hospital in Rome and SOS Telefono Azzurro - an Italian hotline for reporting child abuse.

The Vatican released a copy of Monsignor Scicluna's speech in English Nov. 3.

The five-page speech looked at the role of the Catholic Church in protecting children from abuse, using numerous citations from Pope Benedict XVI's 2010 Letter to the Catholics of Ireland, a papal address to Irish bishops in 2006 and the doctrinal congregation's 2011 circular letter to bishops' conferences on the need to develop clear abuse guidelines.

In his speech, Monsignor Scicluna said the protection and respect of children must be paramount, and seeing them as a gift of God "is the true basis of prevention of child abuse."

Sex abuse of minors by clergy and pastoral workers causes “indescribably repugnant damage” to the child and inflicts “a tragic wound” on the church community.

Sex abuse is not only a crime according to canon law, it is “a crime prosecuted by civil law,” he wrote.

“Although relations with civil authorities will differ in various countries, nevertheless it is important to cooperate with such authority within their responsibilities,” he said. Where the law requires, the reporting of such crimes to the proper authorities should always be followed, he said.

Empowering children and families to understand, detect and speak up about abuse is critical especially “in communities where authority is held in high esteem,” he wrote.

Parents and guardians have a right and duty to “disclose abuse to a higher authority.” However, “where ministers of religion are concerned, disclosure may be complicated by ill-informed and misplaced considerations of loyalty and belonging,” he said in his talk.

The “sacred power” of a priest or religious leader may “unfortunately and wrongly” generate fear and prevent such crimes from being revealed, he wrote.

Communities must be empowered through education and open channels of communication so people are able to “denounce abuse of sacred power for what it is: a betrayal of trust,” he wrote.

While Monsignor Scicluna’s speech looked at actions the Catholic Church has taken, it also said there is more to do. The church and all institutions are still “on a learning curve” and should show more openness to learning about preventative strategies from researchers, he said.

The church also has “the duty to undertake an honest analysis of what went wrong in tragic cases where stewardship was lacking and the response to child abuse was inadequate because of misplaced concerns for the good name of the institutions we represent.”

He noted the problem of deciding what role, if any, perpetrators of abuse should be allowed to have in the church, adding that the welfare of children and the community must be the deciding factors.

He also noted the church understands that “if the perpetrator of abuse is left to his or her own devices the risk of reoffending is very high.”

Religious institutions and communities need to “offer leadership in the formation and screening” of seminarians, priests and pastoral workers, he wrote, and they must adopt clear codes of conduct as well as guidelines for how to deal with cases of misconduct.

The doctrinal congregation released a circular letter earlier this year requiring each bishops’ conference in the world to submit by May 2012 a set of guidelines on how it deals with accusations of abuse and on how it will minister to victims.