

Belgian bishops pledge to pay damages to abuse victims under new plan

OXFORD, England - Belgium's Catholic bishops have pledged a "culture of vigilance" against future sexual abuse by priests and said guilty clergy must compensate their victims even if their crimes are no longer punishable by law.

"We cannot repair the past, but we can take moral responsibility by recognizing sufferings and helping victims recover," Bishop Guy Harpigny of Torunai and Bishop Johan Bonny of Antwerp, the church's delegates for abuse, told a Brussels news conference Jan. 12.

"Above all, we ask forgiveness for the suffering we weren't able to prevent, and we commit to treat this problem differently in future."

The bishops introduced a 52-page booklet, "A Hidden Suffering," setting out lessons from the abuse scandal and a "global action plan" to prevent similar "contradictions of the Gospel ethic."

They said church leaders had been "filled with confusion" at the "wave of moving accounts" of abuse, and had accepted proposals by a parliamentary commission for a "neutral arbitration procedure outside church structures" to enable victims to seek financial damages.

"As bishops and religious superiors, we at first maintained silence. But this silence was not indifference and had nothing in common with any wish to conceal the facts," the bishops said.

"It merely showed our bewilderment. We sank our heads in shock and asked very seriously how all of this could have happened."

Belgium's Catholic Church has been dogged by abuse allegations since early 2010, alongside parallel claims against the church in Germany, Austria and the

Netherlands.

In its brochure, the bishops' conference said the moment had come for "coherent and energetic action" and a "culture of vigilance."

It added that the church's action plan would include "standing on the side of victims" and "breaking the silence," as well as "not leaving abusers in peace" and being "on the look-out for future prevention."

Speaking Jan. 12 to the Associated Press, Bishop Harpigny said the church had initially urged victims to report crimes to the civil authorities, but would now also impose its own penalties by seeking to make abusive priests apologize and pay damages even if their cases were beyond Belgium's statute of limitations.

He added that the church would consider compensation itself if guilty clergy were unable to pay.

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