

Latin America begins feeling ripples of clergy sexual abuse crisis

LIMA, Peru – As clergy sex abuse scandals in Europe made headlines worldwide, bishops in Latin America expressed support for Pope Benedict XVI. But observers say it is just a matter of time before the upheaval that has struck the United States and Europe hits Latin America.

A few cases of sexual abuse of minors by clergy already have surfaced. The most notorious is that of Father Marcial Maciel, founder of the Legionaries of Christ in Mexico, who died in 2008. Other cases have emerged in Argentina, Brazil and Chile, but there have been no widespread accusations.

Recent cases in Europe, and accusations that top church officials did not react quickly or strongly enough, have made headlines in Latin America, however, and observers say the region is not immune to the problem.

“Latin American countries are likely to have the same or more conflicts in this area as the rest of the world,” said Jose Maria Poirier, editor of *Criterio*, a Catholic magazine published in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Because of the historical importance of Catholicism in the region and the close relationship between church and state that persists in many countries, Poirier said, public reaction to widespread revelations of sex scandals, if they occur, could more closely resemble the reaction in Ireland than that of more secular societies, such as the United States and Western Europe.

The impact of news from Europe and criticism of the Vatican’s handling of cases is already rippling through the region, according to Jesuit Father Antonio Delfau, editor of the Catholic magazine *Mensaje* in Santiago, Chile.

“The question is whether church leaders realize how devastating this has been for lay people,” Father Delfau said. “Among young people, there has been a certain distancing from the church.”

Some church leaders deny there has been such an effect. In an April 7 statement, Bishop Felipe Arizmendi Esquivel of San Cristobal de las Casas, Mexico, said, "During the days of Holy Week, multitudes have thronged our churches, more than in other years. ... If they distrusted the church, they would not approach priests to bare their consciences and find pardon and peace" in the sacrament of reconciliation.

The Council of Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean and the Peruvian and Venezuelan bishops' conferences issued statements or wrote letters to the Vatican supporting the pope and criticizing what they called unfair attacks on his handling of sex abuse cases in the past.

In his Holy Thursday homily, Cardinal Norberto Rivera Carrera of Mexico City insisted on a "zero tolerance" policy in cases of sexual abuse in his country. Cardinal Rivera had come under fire in the past for defending Father Maciel.

A statement from the Mexican bishops' conference noted that in the past "bishops did not have the tools or mechanisms to address these problems of pederasty or problems related to priestly celibacy," although it added that "this does not justify" lax handling of cases. "Today things are changing, and these issues are discussed openly," the statement said.

Father Delfau, however, said the Latin American church still lacks transparency and clear rules about due process. Although Cardinal Francisco Javier Errazuriz Ossa of Santiago, Chile, admitted to the press in early April that in his country there was "something to this abuse - very little, thank God," few cases have come to light.

A bishop resigned in 1997 because of "improper conduct" and a priest was sentenced to prison in 2003 for cases of sexual abuse. A lay Spanish member of the St. Viator order who had moved to Chile recently was sentenced to prison for possessing pornographic photos of Spanish children.

Poirier said that if the European sexual abuse crisis spreads to Spain, cases in Latin America are likely to follow. He noted, however, that widespread chauvinism in the region, combined with a degree of tolerance for sexual abuse, affect attitudes toward such cases in the church.

Experts say sexual abuse of minors is widespread in Latin America, partly because of overcrowding in homes, where male and female family members of different ages often share beds. Pan American Health Organization studies of children and adolescents found that 32 percent of girls and 13 percent of boys in Costa Rica and 26 percent of girls and 20 percent of boys in Nicaragua reported having been victims of sexual abuse. In most cases, the abuser is a relative or another person the child knows.

Both Poirier and Father Delfau said Latin American bishops should learn from the mistakes made in handling cases in the United States and Europe and be more proactive in addressing sex abuse and related issues. Poirier said the crisis could be a “time of purification” for the church and urged a review of seminary formation, as well as an emphasis on celibacy as a spiritual aspect of religious life rather than simply a practical option that gives priests more time for pastoral work.

Despite the seriousness of sexual abuse charges, he said, “it is unfair to generalize. The enormous pastoral work done by the church in Latin America cannot be ignored.”

And although reports of sexual abuse undermine the church’s moral authority, he said, “The clergy enjoys a great deal of popular appreciation and respect.”

Despite questions about its authority, Father Delfau said the church could emerge from the crisis stronger and renewed.

“This problem is here to stay,” he said. “There needs to be a new way of addressing issues. I don’t know how far we will sink before that happens or how many people we might lose, but I am convinced that the loss of credibility will be a catalyst for change.”