

Priest leads grass-roots effort to stop child abuse, pornography

VATICAN CITY – For 20 years, Father Fortunato Di Noto and his colleagues have been working to protect children from pedophiles and pornographers. The fact that some church leaders have protected abusers makes Father Di Noto very angry.

“Woe, woe, woe to those who cover up these things. When God cries for these children, a church that covered up these facts will not be able to stand,” he told reporters March 16.

The Sicilian priest is the founder of Meter, an association that began in his parish in Catania after an 11-year-old girl was attacked and other children came forward with stories of abuse.

Meter is now a nationwide organization that staffs a telephone hotline for reporting child sex abuse and child pornography and operates several centers where concerned parents and victims of abuse can receive counseling and assistance.

Father Di Noto said his group is interested in uncovering and stopping abuse wherever it happens, and he believes Meter is just one local example of how the Catholic Church as a whole is taking child sexual abuse seriously as both a sin and a crime.

“I know a few bishops have mishandled some cases, but this has not compromised the entire church,” he said.

Meter works closely with Italy’s postal and telecommunications police in monitoring the Internet. At a news conference hosted by Vatican Radio, the priest presented his organization’s report on pedophilia and child pornography online in 2010.

Father Di Noto said the most frightening thing discovered over the past year is the growth of online pornography involving “infantophilia,” or sexual abuse of infants under the age of 2.

Working with Italian authorities since 2003, the staff of Meter has monitored almost 700,000 websites and reported more than 65,000 of them to police in Italy and around the world because they contained pornographic photographs or videos of children, he said.

The only place online where child pornography seems to be declining, he said, is on social network sites, which have become more diligent in monitoring who uses their sites, the priest said.

Meter staff members visit dozens of Italian dioceses and schools each year to educate people about the phenomena of child sexual abuse and of child pornography online, Father Di Noto said.

In 2010, he said, the group surveyed 1,722 students ages 8-16 in Sicily about their use of the Internet: 29 percent said they use a computer to chat; 23 percent said they use it to download files; 17 percent said they use it to play games.

The most chilling thing, the priest said, is that 62 percent of the children said they had received invitations to meet in person someone they had met only online.