

# Vatican envoy to UN defends church's response to sex abuse

VATICAN CITY – The Vatican has defended its response to the problem of sexual abuse of children by priests, saying that the church had been “cleaning its own house” and that other religions and institutions were similarly tainted.

The Vatican delegation to the U.N. Human Rights Council said in an oral statement Sept. 22 in Geneva that church authorities fully understand the gravity of the issue of child sex abuse by clergy and have taken measures to eliminate the problem.

The statement was delivered on behalf of Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, the Vatican's representative to U.N. organizations in Geneva, as a formal reply to criticism of the church by the International Humanist and Ethical Union, a London-based organization.

Keith Porteous Wood, IHEU representative, accused the church of covering up allegations of the sexual abuse of children, seeking to reduce criminal sanctions and monetary compensation to victims, and avoiding full assumption of responsibility.

Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, director of the Vatican press office, said that, as the Vatican's envoy, Archbishop Tomasi exercised his right to reply to “a very hard and unjust attack.”

The statement read by Monsignor Hubertus van Megen, a member of the Vatican delegation to the Human Rights Council, said, “The church is very conscious of the seriousness of the problem” and cited canon law, which calls for punishing priests involved in sexual abuse, including removal from the priesthood.

The statement cited a 2004 study by the U.S. Department of Education that concluded sexual abuse of students in U.S. public schools by school employees “appears to far exceed the clergy abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church.”

According to the Vatican statement, “we now know that in the last 50 years somewhere between 1.5 percent and 5 percent of the Catholic clergy has been

involved in sexual abuse cases.”

The Vatican statement quoted a Christian Science Monitor article that reported on a 2002 study by Christian Ministry Resources, which concluded that “most American churches being hit with child sexual abuse allegations are Protestant,” and that a similar rate was found within the Jewish community.

“As the Catholic Church has been busy cleaning its own house,” the Vatican statement said, “it would be good if other institutions and authorities, where the major part of abuses are reported, could do the same and inform the media.”

The statement also said that in an upcoming report by the Vatican to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the U.N. body that monitors countries’ implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, “a paragraph will be dedicated to the problem of child abuse by Catholic clergy.”

Archbishop Tomasi’s statement also distinguished between pedophilia, adult sexual attraction to prepubescent children, and ephebophilia, adult sexual attraction to adolescents. It said that of all the priests involved in abuse cases, 80-90 percent “belong to this sexual orientation minority which is sexually engaged with adolescent boys between the age of 11 and 17 years old.”

The International Humanist and Ethical Union reacted to Archbishop Tomasi’s reply on its Web site by saying that the Vatican was “comprehensively missing the point” by arguing that sexual abuse of children occurred in other religions and institutions.

“No doubt there are abusers in all walks of life,” the new statement read, “but our point was not the abuse itself but the cover-up in which some of the highest officials of the church were implicated.”

The union describes itself as a world umbrella organization embracing “humanist, atheist, rationalist, secularist” positions.