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The Vatican still protects pedophile priests

Controversy over recent UN report shouldn't distract from church's culpability

February 11, 2014 9:00AM ET

by **Lauren Carasik** @LCarasik

Urging a sprawling religious institution to take immediate remedial action to redress a scourge of pervasive sexual abuse within its ranks is unlikely to generate global controversy. Unless that organization is the Catholic Church and the edict is issued by a secular watchdog and muddled by the Vatican's unique status as a hybrid sovereign state ruled by its own religious laws and mores.

On Feb. 5, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child [issued a stern rebuke](#) of the Holy See for its failure to comply with its international obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The panel's observations in its [second periodic report](#) on the Vatican accused it of systematically protecting pedophile priests and showing greater concern for preserving its own reputation and protecting the perpetrators than for upholding the best interests of the children. It called on the church to remove abusive clergy from official duty, turn abusers and those who shielded them over to state authorities for prosecution and release its voluminous archives of sexual-abuse complaints.

The U.N. report has reignited a lingering debate between defenders of the church and critics who deplore its handling of the sex-abuse crisis. Survivor groups and their supporters hailed the report as a watershed development in their arduous and lengthy battle to seek redress for past and ongoing abuses as well as efforts to prevent future ones. They have long criticized the Vatican for hiding behind a stony and impenetrable wall of secrecy, obstructing justice, protecting abusers and punishing whistle-blowers.

Barbara Dorris, outreach director for Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, [lauded the report's long overdue attention](#) to a troubling issue for which the church has never publicly answered.

The church has also been censured for its utter failure to acknowledge the incalculable toll of these crimes, including the staggering number of victims, the global reach and the lasting and profound nature of the harm inflicted on victims.

'Limited legal authority'

The report drew an initially curt official response from the Vatican spokesman, who said the Holy See would study the document closely, according to the precepts of international law. Subsequent comments by officials and their surrogates doubled down, casting doubt on the report's accuracy and legitimacy.

The Vatican's U.N. Ambassador Archbishop Silvano Tomasi decried the committee's failure to take into account the reforms that the Holy See has already implemented, suggesting that the report may have been written before church officials appeared before the committee last month and clarified its actions. The Vatican claims that cases of abuse have been sharply reduced. But it declined to answer the committee's request for data on abuse investigations and statistics, stating that the church [released such information only when required](#) by legal proceedings.

Critics note that the Vatican's claim of comprehensive reforms was undermined by lapses in its policies and procedures that belie its public proclamations. [In 2010 the church conceded](#) that its hierarchy does not require bishops to report abuse to authorities. Instead, it defers to local laws to dictate reporting policy, thereby abdicating its responsibility to assist in identifying, removing and punishing predatory priests.

In a recent instance of elevating self-interest over the needs of victims, last year the Catholic Church in California [lobbied against](#) proposed changes to

California's civil statute of limitations. The bill would have granted sexual abuse victims who missed an earlier deadline a one year extension to file lawsuits because of the delayed discovery of psychological problems resulting from abuse. Evidence demonstrates that survivors often need years to come to grips with the trauma and develop the resilience and determination necessary to endure the pain and stigma of seeking redress.

The Holy See claimed it possesses limited legal authority to dictate the conduct of its clergy outside the geographical boundaries of tiny Vatican City. Critics call this defense disingenuous, and the U.N. committee agreed, concluding that the Vatican is the "supreme power of the Catholic Church," in which "subordinates in Catholic religious orders are bound by obedience to the Pope."

The church must fully answer for its past failure to protect children from the clergy entrusted to shape their moral and spiritual development.

Supporters of the church say the report was [distorted by special-interest groups](#) and that the committee's ideological bias blurred the distinction between universally held norms and ideological preferences. In addition to addressing sexual abuse, the report urged the church to consider how the rights of children are affected by its teachings on sexual orientation, given the violence perpetrated against adolescent members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community and discrimination against children of same-sex parents. It also raised the issues of reproductive health, abortion and gender equality. The Vatican and supporters pointedly rejected the U.N.'s suggestions for changes to core church doctrine, which they deem sacrosanct and protected by religious freedom.

Some observers predict that the committee's inclusion of these contested topics will [blunt the impact of the report](#). While commending the U.N.'s attention to the issue of child sexual abuse, [Sister Mary Ann Walsh](#) of the U.S. Council on Bishops said the committee lost credibility by venturing into the culture wars.

But credibility cuts both ways, and the church's selective willingness to mete out discipline against its bishops sheds an unflattering light on its internal priorities. As NPR's senior European correspondent [Silvia Poggioli](#) quipped, "Speaking out publicly in favor of women's ordination, for example, has triggered removal (of a bishop). Not so for covering up sex abuse of minors."

Last month, Bishop Charles J. Scicluna, the Vatican's former chief prosecutor on sex crimes, [told the U.N. committee](#), "It is not a policy of the Holy See to encourage cover-ups. This is against the truth." Yet the Vatican's efforts to cast the scandal as history and claiming that the church now gets it was undercut by contradictory signals from the church. As Scicluna was testifying in Geneva, Pope Francis was [celebrating Mass and meeting privately in Rome](#) with Cardinal Roger M. Mahony, the disgraced former archbishop of Los Angeles who was publicly accused of protecting abusive priests.

The church claims it is taking unparalleled efforts to protect children. But the sex-abuse scandal became public only through persistent and courageous efforts of survivors and their advocates who came forward to demand justice and protect others. Hence the church's mea culpa was forced, at a considerable cost to those who suffered sexual violence at the hands church officials and were often revictimized in telling the truth of their experiences.

It is not enough to prevent future abuse: The church must fully answer for its past failure to protect children from the clergy entrusted to shape their moral and spiritual development. The Vatican must fully cooperate with prosecutors in seeking accountability for abusers and for those whose misguided protection enabled priests to continue inflicting unspeakable damage on young victims. The church must open its archives to shatter the code of silence that shrouded this shameful scandal in secrecy and continues to impede truth and justice.

It would be a shame if the report's inclusion of sexual orientation, gender equality and reproductive health is used to undermine the legitimacy of its withering critique of the systematic protection of pedophiles. The countless young and vulnerable victims of this church deserve better.

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The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America's editorial policy.