

Sex abuse victims doubt Pope's decree on negligent bishops

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A [new decree](#) issued by Pope Francis on 4 June under which bishops can be removed from office if found guilty of negligence involving grave abuse of minors or vulnerable adults has been greeted with cynicism by the National Secular Society and a victim support group.

The new decree does not equate to a criminal prosecution under secular law and the maximum sanction for bishops found guilty under this decree is removal from office, and even that is subject to Pontifical approval. Those disciplined under the new decree will not have a criminal record as a result and the decree does not apply to those of higher, or indeed lower, rank than bishops. Cardinals have been implicated in such facilitation but appear to be immune from sanction.

In a similar move last year, the Pope [announced a Tribunal](#) to discipline such bishops, but it appears never to have met. This decree, and the Tribunal that preceded it, may be a Church response to the growing willingness to prosecute senior clerics, especially in the US, on charges such as child endangerment. By announcing such disciplinary measures, the Church implies that criminal prosecutions are unnecessary and that those suspected of facilitating abuse will be subjected to due process by the Church.

Those states that have signed up to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which includes the Vatican, are subject to a five-yearly review. A review of the Vatican concluded in 2014 that "almost all those who concealed child sexual abuse [were allowed] to escape judicial proceedings in States where abuses were committed". It [recommended](#) that the Church's archives should be shared in order that "all those who concealed their crimes and knowingly placed offenders in contact with children" were held accountable.

There is no evidence that the Vatican followed this, or any other recommendation, of the UN relating to clerical abuse of minors.

Peter Saunders, founder of the National Association for People Abused in Childhood, and who was appointed by the Pope to his Commission on such abuse commented: "Having seen the way the hierarchy of the church functions (if function is the correct description), it is hard to see this latest pronouncement by the Pope making any difference whatsoever to the protection of children. Abusing clergy and those who cover up, whatever their rank, should be removed from ministry immediately and all information about them, held by church officials, should be handed over to the civil authorities."

The Pope is already aware of bishops, archbishops and cardinals who should have been defrocked long ago but continue to live the life of luxury in Rome.

Keith Porteous Wood, NSS Executive Director, added: "In the interests of the countless victims of Catholic child abuse all over the world, we call on the International community to bring pressure to bear on the Vatican to implement the recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child relating to the abuse of children by clerics and those that facilitate them – that they should be made accountable to secular authorities."

The Pope may also have felt under pressure to act given the criticism of him for support of the French Cardinal Barbarin, archbishop of Lyon, who is being investigated by the police following repeated accusations of covering up the cases of priests alleged to have abused minors, despite the law requiring such cases to be reported. Francis has publicly visited Barbarin and opposed calls for his resignation that would be a "a mistake, an imprudence."

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