

Vatican stung by NSS child abuse allegations at UN

Speaking at the United Nations Human Rights Council on 22 September 2009, the Executive Director of the National Secular Society accused the Roman Catholic Church of covering up child abuse in ways that permitted it to be perpetuated. It is thought that this is the first time the Vatican has been directly criticised on the floor of the UNHRC.

Attention was also drawn to the failure of the Holy See to comply with its obligations under International Law.

The accusations were made at the UNHRC meeting in Geneva on Tuesday by Keith Porteous Wood, who was speaking in his capacity as international representative of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (to which the NSS is affiliated).

The [speech](#) made reference to the [IHEU statement](#) published on the UNHRC website in which the Holy See is accused of failing to submit reports as required under the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In his speech, Mr Porteous Wood said that victims of child abuse have been accused of lying by the Church – even in the face of strong evidence. He also said that the Church had covered up allegations, and generally failed to inform the civil authorities, even when obliged to do so. Some dioceses have moved alleged abusers from one location to another, resulting in the abuse continuing.

Mr Wood told the Council: "Clerics implicated in concealment have been permitted to remain in office." He cited Bernard Law, former Archbishop of Boston, who still enjoys papal support as archpriest of a papal basilica in Rome and is still a cardinal.

Mr Wood also accused the Church of taking every possible step to minimise criminal sanctions and the amount of compensation it has paid to victims.

He later said: "For decades the Church has got away with covering up child abuse on a huge scale. The Holy See is in breach of its obligation under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This challenge marks the start of our campaign to shame the UN and the international community into calling the Vatican to account."

[Read the full account of our intervention, including the Vatican's response and the subsequent media coverage](#)

See also:

[Read the IHEU statement, as published by the UN](#)

The speech, as delivered at the UN

UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL: 12th Session (14 Sept – 2 October 2009)

Speaker: IHEU Representative, Keith Porteous Wood: Tuesday 22 September 2009

Agenda Item 4: Matters requiring the attention of the Council

Child Abuse and the Holy See

Mr President,

In 1990 the Holy See acceded to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It submitted its first and only report in 1994 about which CRC expressed several areas of concern^[1]. But since then – nothing. ^[2]

The extent of child abuse within the Catholic Church is well known. What we are addressing here, however, is the reaction of the Church authorities over which the Holy See exerts control.

Victims have been accused of lying, even in the face of strong evidence to the contrary.

The Church has covered up allegations, and generally failed to inform the civil authorities, even when obliged to do so. Moreover, dioceses have frequently moved alleged abusers from one location to another, resulting in repetition of the abuse.^[3]

Clerics implicated in concealment have been permitted to remain in office, such as Bernard Law, Archbishop of Boston^[4] who still enjoys papal support as archpriest of a papal basilica in Rome, and is still a cardinal.

The Church has argued that the problem was minor, [that it did not know the true extent of the problem, or was ignorant of the nature of child abusers or of their recidivist tendencies] yet the scale of the problem has been known to the Church since at least the 1980s. ^[5]

Every possible step has been taken by the Church to minimise both criminal sanctions and the amount of compensation it paid.

["Gagging" clauses are routinely imposed as part of the settlement of cases].^[6]

[Mr President, the Holy See has been complicit in widespread attempts to cover up cases of alleged child abuse perpetrated by members of its clergy and religious orders, apologies are rare, and a general admission of the Church's culpability has yet to be seen.]

We urge the Holy See to recognise its responsibilities to children and the CRC, to bring its reporting up to date, and to instruct its dioceses and religious orders^[7] to report all cases of alleged child abuse to the civil authorities. We suggest that as an institution that claims to have "the highest moral authority", it can do no less.

And we urge the international community to hold the Holy See to account.

Thank you sir.

(Due to to time limitations, text in square brackets was omitted from delivered speech.)

References

[1] <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/3ae6aec910.pdf>

[2] <http://www.catholicsforchoice.org/topics/other/documents/2002rightsofthechildshadowreport.pdf>

[3] [Example: Diocese of Dallas:](#)

[4]

http://www.bostonphoenix.com/boston/news_features/top/features/documents/01847611.htm

[5] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/2548081.stm> although it has treatment centres for child abusing priests (Richard Snipe http://www.richardsnipe.com/reports/snipe_report.htm Fourth phase)

[6] <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article6354966.ece>

[7] <http://www.childabusecommission.ie/rpt/pdfs/CICA-Executive%20Summary.pdf>

Right of Reply from the Holy See

Reply by Papal Nuncio to the Vatican permanent observer mission of the Holy See to the U.N. and other international organizations, H.E. Archbishop Silvano Maria Tomasi, C.S.

Mr. President

Let me clarify the issue raised by the International Humanist and Ethical Union in its intervention

1. In the upcoming report of the Holy See to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, which is finalized as we speak, a paragraph will be dedicated to the problem of child abuse by catholic clergy.
2. While many speak of child abuse, i.e. pedophilia, it would be more correct to speak of ephebophilia, being a homosexual attraction to adolescent males. Of all priests involved in the abuses, 80 to 90% belong to this sexual orientation minority which is sexually engaged with adolescent boys between the age of 11 and 17 years old.
3. From available research we now know that in the last fifty years somewhere between 1.5% and 5% of the catholic clergy has been involved in sexual abuse cases. The Christian Science Monitor reported on the results of a national survey by Christian Ministry Resources in 2002 and concluded: "Despite headlines focusing on the priest pedophile problem in the Roman Catholic Church, most American churches being hit with child sexual-abuse allegations are Protestant".^[1] Sexual abuses within the Jewish communities approximate that found among the Protestant clergy.^[2]
4. About 85% of the offenders of child sexual abuse are family members, babysitters, neighbors, family friends or relatives. About one in six child molesters are other children, while most of the offenders are male^[3].
5. According to a major 2004 study commissioned by the US Department of Education, nearly 10 percent of US Public school students have been targeted with unwanted sexual attention by school employees. The author of the study concluded that the scope of the school-sex problem appears to far exceed the clergy abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church and concluded in an interview with Education Week "the physical abuse of students in schools is likely more than 100 times the abuse by priests".^[4]
6. The Church is very conscious of the seriousness of the problem. The Code of Canon Law stipulates that priests involved in sexual abuse cases must be "punished with just punishments, not excluding expulsion from clerical state"^[5]. The American Bishops Conference issued in 2002 "essential norms for diocesan/eparchial policies dealing with allegations of sexual abuse of minors by priests or deacons". The guidelines mention among others that "in case of sufficient evidence the bishop will withdraw the accused from

exercising the ministry, impose or prohibit residence in a given place or territory...pending the outcome of the process". Other National Bishops Conferences have taken similar measures.

7. As the Catholic Church has been busy cleaning its own house, 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 about it.

[1] Mark Clayton, "Sex Abuse Spans Spectrum of Churches", *Christian Science Monitor*, April 5, 2002, p.1.

[2] Rabbi Arthur Gross Schaefer, "Rabbi Sexual Misconduct: Crying Out for a Communal Response", www.rrc.edu/journal, November 24, 2003.

[3] Dr. Grath A. Rattray, "Child Molesters and Paedophilia", *The Gleaner*, May 14, 2002

[4] Caroline Hendrie, "Sexual Abuse by Educators Scrutinized", in: *Education Week*, March 10, 2004

[5] CIC C. 1395 § 2.