

Will the UN finally bring the Vatican to account for its child abuse crimes?

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*As a United Nations Committee on children's rights confronts the Vatican on its abysmal record on clerical paedophilia and criminal cover-ups, **Keith Porteous Wood** describes his role in bringing the Holy See to account.*

Hardly a month passes without a further scandal emerging of child rape and other sexual violence by clerics acting under the auspices of the Catholic Church.

In the first week of July (2013), as well as a scandal with the Vatican Bank that resulted in its top two executives being fired, there was the release of devastating court papers on the RC Diocese of Milwaukee in which countless boys in a Catholic school for the deaf were abused, presumably chosen because of their reduced capacity to communicate.

An attorney for some of the victims alleges that there were more than 8,000 cases of abuse by more than 100 staff. A harrowing film *Mea Maxima Culpa* has been made about this.

The diocese has declared itself bankrupt, limiting the funds available to victims of abuse.

The Vatican, under its diplomatic nom de plume *The Holy See*, is a signatory of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which incurs a [long list of strict obligations](#).

One of these is five-yearly reporting of the challenges encountered in conforming to the Convention. But the Vatican only filed its report, due in 1997, in 2011.

I complained about the failure to file — under the kind aegis of IHEU — on the floor of the UN Human Rights Council in 2009, 2010 and 2011 (shortly before the eventual submission of the report, which I believe my intervention prompted).

The Committee on the Rights of the Child examined the report and invited interested parties to make submissions, which we did, commenting on the many ways in which the Vatican fell short of its Convention obligations.

On the basis of these submissions, the Committee invited a small number of witnesses to testify at a private session in Geneva. Two victims' organisations were represented: the largest one called SNAP (Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests) and the Survivors' Voice Europe (with NSS member Sue Cox), and myself representing Geoffrey Robertson QC (author of *The Case of the Pope* – essential reading), IHEU as well as the National Secular Society.

With the benefit of the written and oral evidence, the Committee, for the first time, confronted the issue head-on with the Vatican.

In their list of issues raised with the Vatican the Committee asked: "In the light of the recognition by the Holy See of sexual violence against children committed by members of the clergy, brothers and nuns in numerous countries around the world, and given the scale of the abuses" in respect of every case of abuse "committed by members of the clergy, brothers and nuns" (in summary):

- (a) Whether those accused were removed or not from contact with children
- (b) Whether reporting to secular authorities was mandatory
- (c) Whether children were supported when making accusations and whether they were silenced
- (d) What was the outcome in canon law trials and whether there was co-operation with authorities in the countries concerned
- (e) What assistance was given to victims
- (f) What preventative measures are in place

Questions were also asked about the Magdalene Laundries run by nuns in Ireland until their closure in 1996, where inmates (some of whom were girls) were used as forced labour.

In my opinion, having seen the evidence, none of these questions can honestly be answered in a way that will satisfy the Committee.

And that presents the new Pope with a dilemma. His predecessors have flouted the Convention shamelessly while at the same time exploiting the authority that being a signatory brings to seek to force Catholic dogma on other countries, for example so-called "pro-life" positions.

Pope Francis has already said that he will "act decisively" over clerical paedophiles, but doing so will take more than the slick PR we have seen so far; it is a Herculean task. More challenging even than tackling the huge scale and the worldwide spread of this abuse could be making the necessary complete change to the Vatican culture of all his predecessors. And his answers to these questions, and more importantly his actions, will reveal whether he has the willingness and the clout to root out the corruption.

I'm convinced that he was appointed to do just this, and that his predecessor was fired because of his unwillingness to even try. The evidence of Benedict's complicity in cover-ups is clear and continues to mount up, and that was another reason he had to go.

The world and regulatory authorities are running out of patience with the Vatican's harbouring of criminality and criminals, whether over money-laundering or child rape.

Francis's biggest challenge, and his papacy, will be judged on his success in these areas.

Our actions have generated worldwide publicity for this issue.

I am well aware that most abuse occurs outside institutions, but that is not a reason to ignore it. Indeed religious institutions are prone to abuse because of the power wielded by those in authority and in some cases their inevitable pent up sexual frustration. We accept that neither Catholic nor Christian institutions have a monopoly on this, and indeed a [Jewish issue has just hit the news](#). We also recognise that there has been a considerable amount of physical or psychological violence in such institutions which has scarred victims.

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Keith Porteous Wood is the president (and former executive director) of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not represent the views of the NSS.

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