

Pope's zero tolerance pledge on child abuse is not enough

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Words are not enough: David McClenaghan argues that if the Church wants to deal with its record on child abuse it must root out both the offenders and enablers.

The church must not only root out offenders but also those who have allowed crimes to happen by covering them up.

Pope Francis's zero tolerance policy for those in the Catholic Church who abuse children should be a statement of the obvious.

It is a sad indictment of the church that it is not; and that it is being treated as something to be celebrated. The reality is that zero tolerance of paedophile priests is the bare minimum that the church can do to protect vulnerable children and victims of abuse.

The Pope's statement and recent apology for a number of sex scandals involving priests is not enough. He needs to take greater action and show not only zero tolerance towards those who have committed acts of abuse but to those who have protected paedophile priests. It is unacceptable to cover up abuse scandals in the misguided belief that protecting the reputation of the church is more important than protecting vulnerable children.

Pope Francis has used some choice words — comparing the guilty priests to those who worship the devil. His latest remarks, however, will do nothing to intervene and directly protect victims unless a public inquiry is instigated to shed light on the Church's past failings, making sure that lessons are learnt and no further apologies are needed.

In 2012, a report commissioned by the Archbishop of Canterbury within the diocese of Chichester revealed two decades of child protection failures, demonstrating that this type of abuse is not just isolated to one church. The report found that the Church of England's response to the countless cases of child abuse by priests was far too slow, and it is important to remember that clerical child abuse is not just a historical issue but something that is relevant today.

The latest apologies and statements of intent by the Vatican shows that public pressure in the media has done enough to prompt a response, but on a day-to-day basis, the Vatican's legal teams continue to seek to deny victims of abuse compensation by raising technical arguments in an effort to avoid compensating those who have been abused by priests.

Even in cases where a priest has been convicted of the abuse, and the church has apologised for the abuse, the church continues to seek to avoid paying compensation by defending claims on the basis that they have been brought outside the time limit; the abuse was trivial or did not occur in the course of the priest's clerical duties. In the face of these actions, it is difficult not to see statements of intent and apologies as anything but hollow.

If Pope Francis wants to make a real difference to victims of past abuses and in protecting children in the church today and in the future, a much more proactive approach needs to be taken. In

addition to apologising to victims of abuse, the church must show a determination to root out not only those who commit the acts of abuse but those who have allowed it to happen by covering it up. A public inquiry will help ensure that this happens.

Pope Francis has been able to make changes in other areas since taking over the reins from Pope Benedict, but he will leave children just as vulnerable as they have always been unless there is a conscious acceptance by the leaders of the church that protection of vulnerable children must come before protecting the reputation of the church.

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