

21 steps the pope would take if he was committed to tackling child abuse

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As the Catholic Church unveils another inadequate plan to tackle child abuse, this open letter from Keith Porteous Wood highlights some steps the pope could take if he was committed to taking effective action.

Dear Pope Francis

The National Secular Society has been intimately [involved](#) for many years, including at the United Nations, in seeking to secure justice for victims of clerical abuse.

We note that the Vatican has called a meeting to consider the protection of minors in the church, but the church's [21 points for reflection](#) do not remotely go to the heart of obliterating this cancer which the church has tolerated for centuries.

We write to remind you that the international community expects meaningful action on this issue and should have the right to pursue secular justice, regardless of whether the church continues to obstruct it.

With that in mind we offer an alternative 21 action points, 15 of which are based on UN recommendations, which would signal that the Catholic Church is committed to tackling this issue.

1. In the interests of securing secular justice, ensure diplomatic privilege will not be used to obstruct the provision of information on child abuse sought by civil authorities, including such information held in the Vatican.
2. Ensure the church does not obstruct the extradition of those wanted for crimes or to give evidence in criminal or civil cases.
3. Make a formal commitment to engage constructively with the UN committee on the rights of the child (UNCRC).
4. Commit to submitting mandatory reports to the UN [or UNCRC] by their due date.
5. Establish a body responsible for implementing the recommendations of the committee with power to enforce them throughout the church.
6. Submit the Holy See's mandatory five-yearly periodic report to the UNCRC, which was due on 1 September 2017.
7. Immediately remove all known and suspected child sexual abusers from assignment and refer the matter to the relevant law enforcement authorities for investigation and prosecution purposes.
8. Ensure a transparent sharing of all archives which can be used to hold the abusers accountable as well as all those who concealed their crimes and knowingly placed offenders in contact with children.
9. Amend canon law in order for child sexual abuse to be considered a crime.
10. Repeal all [canon law] provisions which may impose an obligation of silence on the victims and on all those that become aware of such crimes.
11. Establish clear rules, mechanisms and procedures for the mandatory reporting of all suspected cases of child sexual abuse and exploitation to law enforcement authorities.

12. Ensure that all priests, religious personnel and individuals working under the authority of the Holy See are made aware of their reporting obligations and of the fact that in case of conflict, these obligations prevail over canon law provisions.
13. Develop comprehensive procedures for the early identification of child victims of sexual and other forms of abuse.
14. Ensure accessible, confidential, child-friendly and effective reporting channels for children who are victims or witnesses of sexual abuse and ensure that child victims of sexual abuse or any other crimes are protected from future abuse and from retaliation when reporting abuse. Parents should obtain assistance in bringing abuse suffered by their children before courts.
15. Ensure that child victims and witnesses of crimes are provided with psycho-social support for their rehabilitation and reintegration and that such measures are not made conditional on confidential settlement preventing children from reporting to national law enforcement authorities.
16. Provide compensation to victims of sexual abuse committed by individuals and institutions under the Holy See's authority without imposing any obligation of confidentiality on the victims and establish a compensation scheme for victims in this respect.
17. Promote the reform of statute of limitations in countries where they impede victims of child sexual abuse from seeking justice and redress.
18. Conduct awareness-raising activities to combat the stigmatisation of victims of sexual exploitation and abuse.
19. Take all appropriate measures to ensure that the UNCRC's 2014 [recommendations](#) are fully implemented.
20. Undertake a comprehensive review of the church's normative framework, in particular canon law, with a view to ensuring its full compliance with the UN convention on the rights of the child.
21. Establish a mechanism at a high level with the mandate and capacity to coordinate the implementation of children's rights across all pontifical councils, episcopal conferences of bishops as well as individuals and institutions of a religious nature that function under the authority of the Holy See.

If the church continues to fail to implement these reasonable recommendations those who value the protection of children will surely conclude that the Catholic Church is not committed to tackling abuse.

Yours sincerely

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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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