

Vatican defends sex abuse record to U.N. panel

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) The Vatican came under sharp criticism Thursday (Jan. 16) for the way it has handled the clergy sex abuse scandal around the world, with even Pope Francis lamenting “corrupt priests” who serve a “poisoned meal” to their flocks.

Vatican officials endured what may be the most high-profile grilling on the topic at a conference hosted by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child in Geneva. This is the first time Vatican officials have been directly questioned in a U.N. context on this topic.

Monsignor Charles Scicluna, a former abuse prosecutor with the Holy See, represented the Vatican at the conference, conceding the magnitude of the problem and saying more had to be done to confront it, but also insisting the Vatican could do little to confront the issue worldwide because of its limited jurisdiction.

“The Holy See gets it,” said Scicluna, now a bishop in Malta. “Let’s not say it is or is not too late. There are clearly certain things that must be done differently in the future.”

The committee accused the Holy See of failing to abide by terms of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, which the Vatican joined in 1990. The treaty calls for parties to take all steps to protect children from harm – something critics say the Vatican has repeatedly failed to do when it acted to protect pedophile priests at the expense of their victims.

The grilling in Geneva came one day after the Archdiocese of Chicago released nearly 6,000 pages of internal documents – including complaints and personnel files on 30 priests — as an auxiliary bishop again apologized for the “sins and crimes” committed in the church.

In a three-page statement issued in Rome, the Vatican’s top spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, tried to create space between the Vatican and abusive priests, saying that critics “presuppose that bishops or religious superiors act as representatives or delegates of the pope — (though this is) utterly without foundation.”

Afterward, victims groups lined up to attack the Vatican’s assertion that it was limited in what it could do to confront the problem.

“The Vatican has consistently refused to accept responsibility for its role in perpetuating rape and sexual violence against children in the church and further enabling it by protecting offending priests,” said Pam Spees, senior staff attorney from the New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights, which has tried to sue the Vatican for crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

While little new information about the sexual abuse scandals has emerged in the 10 months since Francis was elected pope, the popular pontiff has drawn criticism for failing to confront the topic directly beyond drafting a new advisory panel to look at the church’s response.

Speaking at his daily Mass inside the Vatican, Francis on Thursday mentioned the topic in his homily, saying the scandals were the result of a flawed relationship with God.

“Scandals in the church happen because there is no living relationship with God and his Word,” Francis said. “Thus, corrupt priests, instead of giving the bread of life, give a poisoned meal to the holy people of God.”

But for survivors’ advocates, the pope’s remarks so far are inadequate for the size of the problem.

“The new pope seems to be making encouraging gestures in a lot of areas, but he’s doing nothing to even begin to expose, much less reverse, decades of selfish church cover-ups that endanger kids and protect predators,” said Barbara Blaine, president

of SNAP, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests.