

Is Pope Francis ignoring clergy sex abuse? Some are beginning to wonder

by [David Gibson](#)

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(RNS) Pope Francis has spent his first nine months buoyed by a wave of good will and positive coverage generated by his disarming style and frank talk about the need to reform the Catholic Church. But the pontiff may be in for a rough patch as media attention begins to shift to an issue that has bedeviled Rome for more than a decade: the clergy sexual abuse crisis.

The pope himself put the spotlight on the crisis this week when he told bishops visiting from the Netherlands — where a 2011 report found that more than 20,000 children may have been abused in past decades — to support victims “along their painful path of healing.”

But critics said that the pontiff’s comments seemed almost perfunctory, coming at the end of a prepared speech that he handed to the bishops before they met privately for 90 minutes to discuss the grim prospects for Dutch Catholicism.

Moreover, the brevity of Francis’ remarks, their careful phrasing and the lack of any direct apology stood in pointed contrast to his powerful statements on issues such as economic justice and the need for the church to preach mercy and strip itself of pretensions.

Francis has also captivated the public by embracing disfigured pilgrims at the Vatican, cold-calling the downtrodden and washing the feet of young people at a detention center, but he has yet to meet with abuse victims.

“The world is starting to wonder if Pope Francis has forgotten the crisis,” Anne Barrett Doyle of BishopAccountability.org said after Francis’ meeting with the Dutch bishops on Monday (Dec. 2).

The pope, she said, “must address publicly the problems of clergy sexual abuse and its mismanagement with the same candor he has shown on a range of topics, from homosexuality to mediocre homilies. He has shown zest in ridding the Vatican of financial corruption. He must apply the same energy and determination toward ridding the church of bishops who have enabled abuse.”

On Tuesday, a Vatican spokesman, the Rev. Thomas Rosica, issued a sharp retort that rapped critics for “lying in wait” to ambush the pope on this issue. In a detailed statement, Rosica said that Francis has endorsed the stricter policies on abuse implemented by his predecessor, Benedict XVI, and said he is working, often behind the scenes, to bring about a “massive change” in both “mentality and behavior” in the church to prevent abuse, as well as to foster other reforms.

“The entire world has witnessed over the past nine months his concern for those who suffer in any way,” Rosica said. “High among his list of priorities are certainly those who have suffered sexual abuse in their lives. He will continue to address the issue with clarity, transparency, firmness, justice, direction and compassion.”

Other church sources also said that in fact the pope does take the abuse crisis seriously and aims to tackle the most sensitive outstanding issue: holding bishops accountable.

Case in point: The Vatican’s lead prosecutor on abuse cases, the Rev. Robert Oliver, told the National Catholic Reporter last month that Rome is “well aware” of the problem of prelates such as Bishop Robert Finn of Missouri, who remains in office despite a conviction last year for failing to report an abusive priest to authorities. Oliver said accountability for bishops is part of “a broad conversation” that is happening in Rome now that he hopes will result in new measures.

Others note that Francis also sent a bishop as the designated successor to Archbishop John Myers of Newark, N.J., who is under fire for his handling of clergy abuse cases, and in September the pope removed two prelates in Latin America – one the Vatican ambassador to the Dominican Republic and the other a low-ranking bishop in Peru — for child abuse allegations.

But those actions were taken quietly, with no media attention, and in the Newark case both bishops said the move wasn't related to the controversy over Myers. All of that contributed to a sense that the pope does not want to call attention to this topic in the way he has to many others.

Another factor may be that the media haven't pushed the issue: During his free-wheeling, 80-minute meeting with reporters on the plane returning from Brazil last July, Francis was asked about almost everything — except the abuse crisis. In fact, he went out of his way to note that “the abuse of minors is a crime.” Similarly, the editor of an Italian daily who had a wide-ranging conversation with Francis in September also did not raise the issue, nor did the Jesuit priest who interviewed Francis in August for the 12,000-word blockbuster interview that was published in September.

“We talked about many topics, but not all the possible topics,” the Rev. Antonio Spadaro said in an email after the interview was published. “I just never had in mind to talk with him about that topic” — the abuse crisis — “and it never came out in our talks.”

Soon after Francis' election, seven in 10 U.S. Catholics told the Pew Research Center that addressing the crisis should be his top priority, and its back-burner status hasn't gone unnoticed. Veteran Vatican watcher John Allen of NCR has noted that Francis has been “relatively quiet” on the topic and said the pope needs to take some concrete, public steps to show that “he means business.”

This week, Robert Mickens, the Vatican correspondent for The Tablet, a Catholic weekly based in London, echoed Allen's concerns.

“I can understand his desire to start the new pontificate off on a positive note, but sexual abuse by priests has not been totally eliminated,” Mickens wrote in an email. “And, worse, the bishops are still rather clumsy — at best — in the way they have handled accusations. This is, without a doubt, one of the weakest aspects of his pontificate.”