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Dutch Bishops Apologize for Sexual Abuse

By **ALAN COWELL**

LONDON — Roman Catholic bishops in the [Netherlands](#) said Friday that they offered “sincere apologies” to victims of sexual mistreatment, hours after [a report](#) by an official commission said church officials had “failed to adequately deal with” abuse affecting as many as 20,000 Dutch children in Catholic institutions.

It remained unclear, however, whether the report broke significant new ground in a tortured debate over the relationship between sexual abuse and Catholic institutions.

Based on a survey of more than 34,000 Dutch adults 40 and over, the report said that 10 percent of them had suffered from some form of abuse while they were children — a proportion that doubled to about 20 percent among those who had spent some of their youth in institutions, irrespective of their affiliation.

Referring to the probability of minors’ being sexually abused in institutions rather than in any other location, the report said, “It emerged that the risk was twice as high as the national average, but with no sufficient difference between Roman Catholic and non-Roman Catholic institutions.”

And, tacitly supporting an argument offered frequently by the [Vatican](#), it said that the impression in media coverage “that sexual abuse of minors occurred primarily within the Roman Catholic Church needs to be qualified.”

“Sexual abuse of minors,” it said bluntly, “occurs widely in Dutch society.”

Terence McKiernan, the president of bishopaccountability.org, a nonprofit Web site based in Massachusetts that seeks to collate documentation about the sexual abuse crisis, said the commission’s conclusions seemed puzzling.

“It seems they are saying that there’s no difference in instances” of abuse “between the Catholic situation and other institutions they examine,” he said in a telephone interview.

But anecdotal evidence in the report concerning two Catholic orders — the Brothers of Charity and the Salesians of Don Bosco — suggested “that the Catholic situation was worse than in other denominations.”

In the report, for instance, the commission found that “there is evidence that sexually inappropriate behavior towards members of the order” among the Salesians of Don Bosco “may perhaps have been part of the internal monastic culture.”

The Dutch commission, which described itself as independent, was established at the behest of the Roman Catholic Church in the Netherlands in 2010 to investigate accusations of abuse since 1945. Its creation followed incidents at one cloister that inspired a series of accusations of abuse by priests at other institutions.

Its findings showed what some analysts said was one of the highest levels of abuse on a continent that has been forced to confront a steady stream of public disclosures about the behavior of priests and church workers toward minors.

Almost one-third of the Netherlands’ more than 16 million people profess Catholicism, making their faith the largest in the country, according to the country’s official statistics for 2008. The report said the church’s response to accusations there in many cases “failed to take adequate action and paid too little attention to victims.”

Sexual abuse, the report said, “was covered up” and measures to prevent or punish it “were not taken in order to avoid any further scandal.”

“The scale of sexual abuse of minors in the Roman Catholic Church in the period 1945 to 2010 is relatively small in percentage terms, but is a serious problem in absolute numbers,” the report concluded. “Several tens of thousands of minors have experienced mild, serious and very serious forms of inappropriate sexual behavior.”

The report, which was published online in English in summary form, said the commission had received some 1,800 reports of abuse at Catholic schools, seminaries and orphanages as it gathered evidence between March and December in 2010.

The commission then conducted a broader survey among more than 34,000 Dutch nationals aged 40 and over. The online poll suggested that from 1945 to 1981 between 10,000 and 20,000 children were sexually abused in church institutions, with offenses ranging from inappropriate touching to “several thousand” cases of “serious abuse.”

The commission identified about 800 clergy and lay church workers named in complaints as perpetrators of abuse. Of them, 105 were still alive, but their status within the church was not clear. It did not identify them by name.

The latest charges added vivid testimony to the disturbing imagery of priestly abuse that has spread in recent years across Europe from Belgium to Ireland and Austria as well as in Canada and the United States, forcing [Pope Benedict XVI](#) to apologize to victims whose traumas were often

hidden by church cover-ups.

Wim Deetman, a Protestant former education minister who led the commission, said the report showed that the extent of abuse could no longer be denied. “The idea that people did not know it and administrators did not know it cannot be maintained,” he said, according to Reuters.

In a statement, the conference of Roman Catholic Bishops in the Netherlands said the abuse “fills us with shame and sorrow.” The bishops also said they were “shocked by the sexual abuse of minors and the practices detailed in this report.” The report was published a month after the Dutch branch of the Roman Catholic Church announced a system to compensate victims with payments of up to \$138,000.

The publication of the report could build further pressure on the Vatican. In September, human rights lawyers and victims of clergy sexual abuse [filed a complaint](#) in the United States urging the International Criminal Court in The Hague to investigate and prosecute Pope Benedict XVI and three top Vatican officials for crimes against humanity for what they described as abetting and covering up the rape and sexual assault of children by priests. The formal filing of nearly 80 pages by two American advocacy groups, the Center for Constitutional Rights and the [Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests](#), was the most substantive effort yet to hold the pope and the Vatican accountable in an international court for sexual abuse by priests.

Stephen Castle contributed reporting from Brussels.