

What Pope Francis Can and Must Do Now to Address the Epidemic of Sexual Violence in the Catholic Church

Sexual violence by priests and other church officials has severely impacted the lives and violated the rights of hundreds of thousands of people, mostly children. Unfortunately, this is not a “problem of the past;” widespread sexual violence within the Catholic Church continues today. In countless cases that span the globe, high level church officials, including Pope Francis, bear responsibility for enabling sexual violence instead of taking the necessary measures to prevent it.

The Catholic Church is governed as a monarchy with the Pope having “supreme, immediate and universal ordinary power.” This is what the Pope can and must do immediately to address sexual violence in the Church.

1. Remove those who harm

In many cases, priests who rape or otherwise sexually violate children or others are not reported to local authorities. The Church engages in “priest shifting,” where priests accused of sexual violence are transferred to another location and continue working within the Church.

Today, throughout the world, priests who are known to church officials to be perpetrators continue to hold posts in congregations, schools, orphanages, and elsewhere unbeknownst to local communities.

The Pope has the authority to remove all priests who are known to have harmed and require reporting to secular authorities and must do so immediately.

2. Punish those who cover up

Church officials often refuse to report cases of rape and sexual violence by clergy to local authorities. In fact, in various countries and on the international level, the Vatican has actively worked to avoid requirements regarding mandatory reporting.

Not only do church officials often refuse or delay reporting but they destroy evidence and cover-up crimes. As the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child found in February 2014, the Vatican “has consistently placed the preservation of the reputation of the Church and the protection of the perpetrators above children’s best interests.”

The Pope can and must make reporting to civil authorities mandatory everywhere the Catholic Church operates. The Pope must ensure the Vatican punishes all church officials who fail to report, cover-up crimes and otherwise obstruct justice.

3. Protect, promote & publicly praise church whistleblowers

The Vatican intimidates and retaliates against victims and witnesses who come forward about sexual violence, including blaming victims for the violence committed against them and firing nuns and priests who have reported sexual violence.

Instead, the Pope can and must encourage all witnesses to crimes by clergy to come forward. The Pope and Vatican can do this by protecting, promoting, and publicly praising whistleblowers and others working towards the eradication of sexual violence in the Church.