

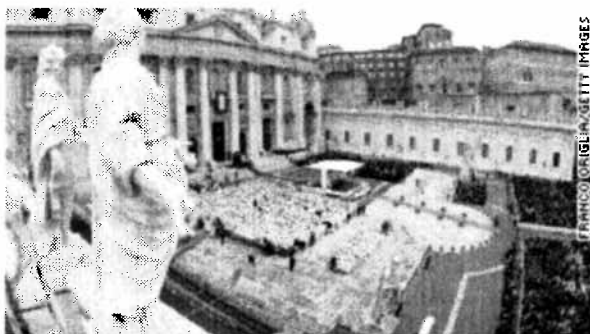
Pope Francis asks forgiveness for priests who sexually abused children

By Daniel Burke and Laura Smith-Spark, CNN
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(CNN) -- Pope Francis made his strongest condemnation yet of sexual abuse by Catholic clergy on Friday, asking for forgiveness and pledging to impose penalties on "men of the church" who harm children.

"I feel compelled to personally take on all the evil which some priests -- quite a few in number, obviously not compared to the number of all the priests -- to personally ask for forgiveness for the damage they have done for having sexually abused children," the Pope said in remarks quoted by Vatican Radio.



Pope sorry for clergy who sexually abused



Victim: Responsibility can't be dodged

"The

church is aware of this damage, it is personal, moral damage carried out by men of the church, and we will not take one step backward with regards to how we will deal with this problem, and the sanctions that must be imposed," Francis continued.

"On the contrary, we have to be even stronger. Because you cannot interfere with children."

The U.S.-based Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests said it may be the first time a pope has spoken of sanctioning "complicit bishops."

"But that is all it is: talk," said Barbara Dorris, SNAP's outreach director.

"We beg the world's Catholics: Be impressed by deeds, not words. Until the Pope takes decisive action that protects kids, be skeptical and vigilant."

The Pope's new comments, made Friday to members of a Catholic nongovernmental organization, the International Catholic Child Bureau, represent a shift from his previous statements on sexual abuse.

In an interview with Italian newspaper Corriere della Serra in March, Francis struck a defensive tone, saying, "The Catholic Church is perhaps the only public institution that has moved with transparency and responsibility. No one has done more. And yet the church is the only one that has been attacked."

Advocates for victims of sexual abuse had slammed those remarks, calling them another example of the church prioritizing its reputation over the protection of children.

'Highest priority'

Early this year, a United Nations panel slammed the Vatican's handling of child sexual abuse within the Catholic Church and accused the church of protecting itself rather than the victims.

The Vatican said in February that it would study the report, which claimed clerics were involved in the sexual abuse of "tens of thousands" of children.

And in late March, Francis appointed an eight-member committee -- a mix of clergy and laypeople, including a sexual abuse survivor -- to advise the church on how to protect children, punish abusers and train church staff.

"Pope Francis has made it clear that the church must uphold the protection of minors amongst her highest priorities," Vatican spokesman the Rev. Federico Lombardi said in a statement announcing the committee members.

However, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests dismissed the new panel, saying it was "based on a deceptive premise" and perpetuated the "self-serving myth that Catholic officials need more information about abuse and coverups."

Rocked by scandal

Pope Francis took over the helm of the Catholic Church just over a year ago from Benedict XVI, whose papacy was marked by the emergence of repeated allegations of sexual abuse by priests.

Benedict said many times that abusers should be prosecuted, but victims' groups again said he did too little.

Benedict spoke with some victims of sexual abuse by priests on papal visits to countries including the United States and the United Kingdom, where he expressed his "deep sorrow" about the scandal. The Vatican selected those he met.

In April 2013, a month after taking office, Francis recommended that the church's doctrinal office "act decisively with regard to cases of sexual abuse," the Vatican said at the time.

This would be "by promoting measures for the protection of minors, as well as in offering assistance to those who have suffered abuse, carrying out due proceedings against the guilty," it said.

Kick out those who sexually abuse children, U.N. panel tells Vatican

CNN's Hada Messia contributed to this report.