

FAITH | Rosie Scammell, Religion News Service

Friday, June 26, 2015

Rome summit looks to improve church's handling of child sexual abuse

As the Vatican continues to work on policies to combat clergy sex abuse, a leading pontifical university in Rome hosted a conference this week on how the Catholic Church can better address the current crisis and released details of a new diploma program on protecting children.

A series of measures pushed through in recent months by Pope Francis has given Vatican officials new tools for dealing with child molesters within the church, but critics argue that the Holy See has been too slow to act on scandals globally.

In the latest such move, the Vatican set a July trial date for Jozef Wesolowski, a Polish ex-archbishop who stands accused of abusing children while ambassador to the Dominican Republic. He will be tried in a Vatican criminal court, an unusual step.

That announcement came just days after the pope approved the Vatican's first system for judging bishops who fail in their duty to protect children from abusive clerics, a plan proposed by the papal commission that Francis set up to tackle sexual abuse.

As new policies are implemented at the Vatican, similar discussions are underway in Rome and around the world.

The four-day conference at Pontifical Gregorian University — a top Jesuit-run school sometimes known as “the pope's Harvard” — brought the debate to the heart of Rome.

Speaking on Wednesday at the end of the conference, Bishop Edward J. Burns of the Diocese of Juneau, Alaska, who is chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' committee on child protection, said participants had “acknowledged that the sacred has been twisted by evil.”

“That is to say, the sacred lives of innocent children have been abused,” he went on. “We used these days to strategize on how we can improve our work, in creating a safe environment in our church for our children, our youth and those who are vulnerable.”

Some 70 participants from countries around the world also looked back into church history for lessons, with Sister Sara Butler, president of the U.S.-based Academy of Catholic Theology, telling journalists that efforts had been made to tackle the scourge of clerical abuse a thousand years ago.

For example, Butler called the 11th-century Italian Benedictine and cardinal St. Peter Damian a “doctor of reform” for establishing lay-led advisory boards to combat “rampant” abuse by clergymen.

“This was a successful reform movement in the 11th century which is a kind of model for what we are doing today,” she said.

Reflecting on present-day progress, the Rev. Hans Zollner, a Jesuit priest and president of the university's Centre for Child Protection, said that despite some resistance the Catholic Church has "grown more proactive" in recent years.

"Worldwide, especially in those countries where the scandals hit most — many of the Anglophone countries — the church has done a lot," he said. "But in all this, the very first response was often defensive, and in some cases, is still now defensive."

Zollner is trying to establish best practices for child protection officers working with Catholic institutions by establishing a diploma course in the safeguarding of minors.

"We are happy that from February 2016 we will open this possibility for a number of people. We hope to address this course especially to people who come from countries where there are no or very little such initiatives, especially in Asia, in Africa and in Latin America," he said.

The one-semester residential course will focus on areas such as recognizing signs of abuse, helping survivors and developing prevention programs.

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FAITH | Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service

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Washington Cathedral dean on Confederate flags: 'It is time to take those windows out'

The dean of Washington National Cathedral has called for two stained-glass windows featuring Confederate flags to be taken down from the Gothic edifice, in yet another instance of institutions reconsidering countless tributes to the Southern cause.

"It is time to take those windows out," said the Very Rev. Gary Hall in a Thursday announcement.

The prominent building on the skyline of the nation's capital includes windows honoring

the prominent building on the skyline of the nation's capital includes windows honoring Confederate generals Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee, and each contains an image of the controversial flag.

“The Cathedral installed these windows, in part, because its leadership at the time hoped they would foster reconciliation between parts of the nation that had been divided by the Civil War,” said Hall, who has called for the governing bodies of the cathedral to remove the windows that have been there since 1953.

But at a time when the nation is mourning the killings of nine people at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C., allegedly by a shooter who embraced the flag, Hall said the cathedral should take a different approach. He also cited the recent killings of unarmed black men at the hands of police officers.

“Here, in 2015, we know that celebrating the lives of these two men, and the flag under which they fought, promotes neither healing nor reconciliation, especially for our African-American sisters and brothers,” Hall said.

The cathedral’s announcement comes as religious and political leaders have called for the flag to be taken down from the grounds of the South Carolina State House and elsewhere. On Wednesday, the board of visitors of The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina, voted 9-3 in favor of removing the Confederate Naval Jack from its chapel “to an appropriate location” on its campus.

“I think this is a major, major statement now, continuing with sort of the domino effect that has occurred across the country, to remove any vestiges of the Confederacy because it has become painfully apparent to all of those who defended it for so long that it is offensive,” said history professor Jason Silverman, an expert on the American Old South at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, S.C. “It’s now being interpreted as being dangerous.”

Given the nature of the cathedral space, Hall said, a change in the windows will take “time, energy and money.” In the interim, he said, a display will be placed near the windows “to explain them in their historical context.”

“We will gather a representative group to work with us to imagine how new windows can best represent our shared history of war and peace, racial division and reconciliation,” he said. “We will also discuss the future of the Jackson and Lee windows.”

Silverman, who visited the cathedral a few years ago during a trip to Washington, said he noticed the red and blue panels that featured the Confederate flags and thought it was “really odd” that the cathedral included them.

He noted that the decision to install them came just before the 1954 landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision against school segregation.

“I’m almost thrilled, in one sense, chronologically, that it comes sort of right on the cusp in the 1950s before everything changes,” said Silverman. “I can’t believe that would have even been proposed in, say, ’57, ’58, ’59 or ’60.”



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