

R4 - Sunday - Sheila Hollins

*One of the Catholic Church's leading experts on safeguarding has resigned from the Vatican's Child Protection commission, saying he's become increasingly concerned about how it is being run. The German Jesuit priest Father **Hans Zollner**, is a psychotherapist and theology professor at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, where he also leads the Center for the Study of Abuse.*

*Our reporter **Orla O'Brien** can tell us more.*

The pontifical Commission for the Protection of minors was setup in 2014 by Pope Francis as an advisory body and a permanent commission attached to the Holy See. Its first president was Cardinal Sean O'Malley and he still holds that role. The Commission's job is to uphold the dignity of children and vulnerable adults and protect them from sexual abuse. It is important to note though, that it doesn't have the authority to investigate or adjudicate individual cases of abuse.

How does it work then?

The Pope appoints the Commission's president, secretary and its members. They don't have to be clerics, so they're often experts in their field in relation to child safeguarding. When it was setup, the Vatican said the commission would take a multi-pronged approach to protecting young people that would include education about the exploitation of children, discipline of offenders, and also developing best practices within the church as it has emerged in society at large.

Since it's been set up, it has faced quite a bit of criticism, though, hasn't it?

In March of 2017, there was just one active member of the Commission who was a survivor of abuse, Marie Collins, and she resigned from the group. She helped set up the safeguarding office at the Archdiocese of Dublin in 2003. When she resigned from the Pontifical commission, she said there were several stumbling blocks which included a lack of resources, inadequate structures around support staff, slowness of forward movement and also cultural resistance. She said at the time the most significant problem was the reluctance of some members of the Vatican Curia to implement the recommendations of the commission despite their approval by the Pope. She also said pointedly, it is devastating in 2017 to see that these men can still put other concerns before the safety of children and vulnerable adults.

What about structural changes that have been brought to the Commission over time?

Last September, Pope Francis appointed 10 new members to the body. But the biggest change happened early last year when the pope made the Commission part of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. Some former members of the Commission have suggested this could reduce its effectiveness in protecting young people and vulnerable adults. Baroness Hollins, a former member, said that it was inappropriate to put a commission that's all about safeguarding into the department that deals with allegations against priests.

So what's happening now, Orla?

Last week, Father, Hans Zollner, resigned from the Commission. Father Zollner is a trained psychologist and psychotherapist and one of the church's leading anti-abuse experts. He's been a member of the Papal commission since it was set up in 2014. In a statement released on Twitter, he said that the protection of children and vulnerable people must be at the heart of the Catholic Church's mission. He also said that there were issues that needed to be urgently addressed, and that there should be transparency on how decisions are taken by the Commission. In response to Father Zollner's statement, Cardinal O'Malley, the Commission's President said that he was surprised, disappointed and strongly disagreed with Father Zollner's comments questioning the Commission's effectiveness.

Baroness Sheila Hollins *was among the first appointees to that commission, a former president of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. She's a leading expert on child psychiatry and psychotherapy. And she's been giving me her impressions of father Hans Zollner.*

SH:- I've known him since 2012, when he was hosting a conference and I was an invited speaker. I had accepted the invitation on condition that I could speak alongside a survivor of abuse. He agreed and Marie Collins and I went together to speak to bishops from around the world. And it was following on from that, that both Mary and I were invited to become members of this new pontifical commission to advise Pope Francis. So yes, indeed, I've known him a long time. I hold him in the highest regard. He's a man of integrity. He communicates especially well with priests, bishops and religious, helping them to understand and to learn how to listen to victims and survivors of abuse. His departure from the Pontifical commission will be a huge loss.

Well, he's clearly had enough. And I have the impression that you probably understand his feelings on that.

When Father Zollner raises concerns about transparency and accountability, that has to be taken really, really seriously and those concerns need to be addressed. This isn't something you can sweep under the carpet. I know that he will have taken advice, that he will have consulted the Holy Father, that he will have explained his concerns, and for him to resign suggests that so far his concerns haven't been adequately addressed.

What do you think is going wrong with this commission?

I'm not close enough to it now to know. I was in Rome in November and I met the current secretary. I have to say I was not impressed. What is perceived by so many as a slowness on the part of the church to respond adequately, and a failure to learn from what has been learned in one country after another as clerical abuse has gradually emerged. This is going to happen all over the world, in the places that at moment think that it's not an issue for them. You need to have people in leadership in this who actually have not just the authority to do it, but actually have got the professional competencies. And I think at the moment that I'm unconvinced that the right competencies are in place.

To what extent do you think clericalism is getting in the way, the power dynamics of hierarchy, institutional protectionism, the different bits of the Vatican, closing doors to other bits of the Vatican We've heard a lot about that over the years. Is that at the centre of this?

I think clericalism is behind the church's response. I mean, don't forget that sexual abuse, just how widespread abuses are within our society generally. This is about keeping children and vulnerable adults safe. It's about healing and care. It's about not just compensating people financially or by paying for therapy and so on. It's also about welcoming victims and survivors and their families back into the church community and looking for spiritual healing. The concerns that Father Zollner has mentioned just mustn't be ignored, because it suggests, and I don't really want to get into Vatican politics in any kind of way, but it suggests that, you know, a lack of transparency, a lack of accountability. There are some things going on that he has seen, which he feels are not going to take this work forward in a way that that is needed.