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CNS documentary service

Opportunities and Challenges for the Ministry of Safeguarding

Myriam Wijlens

Church leaders need to be more proactive rather than reactive in dealing with the sexual abuse crisis, canon lawyer Myriam Wijlens said. Wijlens, a professor at the University of Erfurt in Germany and a member of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, spoke Feb. 14 at the graduation ceremony of the diploma in safeguarding at the Center for Child Protection at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. Wijlens spoke about the need to have more women in charge of investigations of abuse and cover-up. She said, "Time and again victims, their

"Why is it so difficult for the local churches and congregations to learn from each other in these matters?"

families and other faithful have remarked how important it is to them that a woman who is not employed by the diocese but who, due to her profession and studies, knows the internal structures and modes of operating in the church well has been delegated by the ecclesial authorities to do the investigation." She also noted that in her experience as an investigator, not being employed by a diocese gave her freedom "to speak the truth and verbalize it, of course respectfully, but certainly more clearly in meetings with the relevant ecclesial authority." Wijlens also spoke about how much it means to victim-survivors to have their abuser admit the abuse and to have church leaders admit to any cover-up. "Sometimes the fact that they were not believed and maybe even punished for telling their story caused even more harm than the abuse itself," Wijlens said. "They want to hear from the church that what happened was not 'their fault.' They have a need to be told officially — oftentimes by a person who holds authority in the church — such as a bishop or major superior — that they are not responsible for what occurred." Wijlens' speech follows.

It is an honor and great privilege for me to be invited to speak here today on the occasion of the fifth graduation of the diploma in safeguarding. The fifth graduation calls for a special moment to celebrate, to give gratitude, to take stock and to see which challenges lie ahead.

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