

What's The Fallout?

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The New Paper, 9 July 2014

Following Dr Vincent Wijesingha clarifying his remarks on allegations of sexual abuse by Catholic priest, Linette Heng (linheng@sph.com.sg) examines the parties involved in the episode

In a surprising turn of events, Dr Vincent Wijesingha clarified on Saturday that his earlier remarks about the inappropriate behaviour of a priest towards him is not a "specific allegation of abuse".

His clarification was in response to a letter by the Catholic Church on Friday urging him to report his allegations to the church and the police.

Dr Wijesingha (left), 44, had claimed in a Facebook post last month that when he was 15, a Catholic priest tried to molest him and show him pornographic magazines.

The civil activist's sensational revelation followed Archbishop William Goh's earlier statements on homosexuality to the Catholic community.

In a further Facebook post on Monday, Dr Wijesingha declared that he would not be commenting further on the issue.

Will there be any consequences for the three parties — Dr Wijesingha, the Catholic Church, and the group whose causes he champions — involved in the episode?

Dr Wijesingha

Why raise the claim after almost 30 years, only to clarify that he was not "abused and damaged" after he was asked to follow-up with a police report?

Singapore Management University Associate Professor of Law Eugene Tan feels the episode has gravely undermined Dr Wijesingha's credibility.

"The Catholic Church has reached out to Dr Wijesingha and even asked him to report his allegations to the police, which signals their zero tolerance on such misconduct by priests.

"He has cast the first stone and when the church responded, he chose not to take any action.

"If he does not intend to pursue the matter, why bring up the case?"

The Catholic Church

Dr Wijesingha's allegations against a Catholic priest is one of the first in Singapore.

This comes amidst accusations round the globe of sexual abuse by Catholic priests.

On Monday, Pope Francis asked for the forgiveness of these victims and demanded that church leaders take responsibility for the protection of minors.

IPS senior research fellow Mathew Mathews, who has studied the role of religion in shaping the views of Singaporeans, does not think Dr Wijeyasingha's allegations have hurt the church's reputation.

"Many Singaporeans see religious institutions as institutions they can trust. At times when religious leaders conduct themselves in a way which is unbecoming, people are affected.

"But most understand that a wrongful act of one leader does not reflect on the majority of a religious organisation's leadership," he said.

Dr Mathews added that the church's response was appropriate.

"The Church had asked Dr Wijeyasingha to report his allegations to Catholic Archdiocese Professional Standards Office (PSO) and the police.

"It was interested in investigating any allegation of abuse.

"This is the best it can do to show that it takes this matter seriously and wants to maintain its credibility among its members and wider society," said Dr Mathews.

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender(LGBT) Community

Pastor Miak Siew of the Free Community Church, which accepts same-sex and transgender relationships, does not think that the LGBT movement has been affected by Dr Wijeyasingha's allegation.

"Dr Vincent Wijeyasingha spoke in his private capacity. Why should it affect the credibility of the LGBT movement?

"He is not a spokesperson for the community, just as I am not a spokesperson for the community," Mr Siew said.

Associate Prof Tan agreed. He does not think that the allegations by Dr Wijeyasingha have hurt the cause.

"Dr Wijeyasingha is not recognised as a torch-bearer or spokesperson of the LGBT cause.

"In fact, there is no individual here who is seen as the spokesperson. The LGBT movement is a heterogenous group which believes in different strategies, from pursuing legal challenges to quiet engagement," he said.

Prof Tan added that he favours frank and open debates, but called for more responsibility, especially in discussions of sensitive topics.

"While Dr Wijeyasingha's diatribe has not hurt the church or the LGBT movement, it does have a ripple effect and could infect future discussions and interactions."

But Mr Siew thinks that there has been no attempt at dialogue so far from his experience over the past few weeks.

"All I experienced is being talked about and talked at. A dialogue involves an exchange, a conversation, and listening to each other. That has not happened.

"We have been listening to what is said about us being detrimental to society and being a threat to 'family'. I wonder if people have heard our stories," he said.