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Missouri Attorney General Eric Schmitt is referring 12 former clergy for potential criminal prosecution after his office completed a 13-month investigation of sexual abuse within the Roman Catholic Church.

Schmitt on Friday released details of the investigation of religious leaders within the Archdiocese of St. Louis and the dioceses of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Springfield-Cape Girardeau and Jefferson City.

Missouri is among several states that launched investigations last year after a Pennsylvania report cited abuse of more than 1,000 children by hundreds of priests there since the 1940s, and efforts by church leaders to hide it.

The Missouri investigation began in August 2018 under then-Attorney General Josh Hawley. Hawley was elected to the U.S. Senate in November, and Schmitt, a fellow Republican, took over the investigation after he was appointed to replace him.

Schmitt said the 12 referrals are the most by any state attorney general since the Pennsylvania report.

"The betrayal of trust and of innocence is devastating and in many ways incomprehensible," Schmitt, himself a Catholic, said at a news conference in St. Louis.

The investigation reviewed personnel records for every priest serving in Missouri dating to 1945 — more than 2,000 priests and 300 deacons, seminarians and religious women, Schmitt said. Investigators also spoke to abuse survivors and their relatives who contacted the attorney general's office.

Investigators found 163 priests or clergy members accused of sexual abuse or misconduct against minors. Eighty-three have died. Of the 80 still alive, the statute of limitations has run out on 46 of the crimes, Schmitt said.

One case is still under open investigation by the Catholic Church. Schmitt said 16 cases have been previously referred for local prosecution and five cases have been or are being investigated by prosecutors, leaving the 12 potential cases Schmitt is referring for prosecution.

Schmitt's office also provided recommendations to the Catholic Church. They included assuming greater responsibility and oversight of religious order priests and those visiting from other dioceses; developing independent review boards composed entirely of lay people; and being more open when a priest is removed from the ministry.

Schmitt said the clergy abuse hotline will remain open and he encouraged any additional abuse victims to come forward.

Each of the state's Roman Catholic jurisdictions conducted its own internal investigation , too.

The St. Louis investigation released in July found 61 clergy with what the archdiocese called "substantiated" allegations of sexual abuse of children. Thirty-four of the priests are deceased. The archdiocese said all of the living priests have been removed from the ministry. The list separately named three additional priests accused of possessing child pornography.

The Kansas City-St. Joseph Diocese released its report last week, citing 19 clerics, none of them currently serving. Thirteen have died, two have been removed from ministry, and four have been removed from ministry. One of the laicized clerics, Shawn Ratigan, is serving 50 years in federal prison on a 2013 conviction for producing or attempting to produce child pornography.

The other two dioceses released similar lists of accused religious leaders last year. The Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau identified 16 priests with credible accusations of sexual abuse of children. The Diocese of Jefferson City listed 35 credibly accused church officials, including 30 priests and five members of a religious order.

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