News



French bishops Eric de Moulins Beaufort, left, and Dominique Blanchet attend a press conference in Lourdes, southwestern France, Saturday, Nov. 9, 2019. 120 bishops are convening for their biannual assembly in Lourdes, where they will discuss the plan for a "financial gesture" toward victims of sexual abuse by the clergy. (AP/Bob Edme)

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French bishops on Saturday approved plans to financially compensate people abused sexually within the Roman Catholic Church.

Any person recognized by their bishop as a victim will be eligible to receive money, they said, and the church will appeal for donations to foot the bill. Bishops also voted to allocate 5 million euros ($5.5 million) to an independent commission examining church sex abuse in France and to support prevention efforts.

Eric de Moulins-Beaufort, the archbishop of Reims and president of the Conference of French Bishops, said payments to victims will recognize both their suffering and "the silence, negligence, indifference, lack of reaction or bad decisions or dysfunction within the Church."

The fund was green-lighted by 120 bishops at their biannual assembly in the southwestern town of Lourdes.

The bishops didn't decide on the fund's size or how payments will be made. They will consider a more detailed implementation plan at their next gathering in April.

François Devaux, president of La Parole Liberee, an association of church sex-abuse victims, said payments will help compensate for the "colossal financial impact" of sex abuse on children who, as adults, later struggle in their professional and family lives.

Moulins-Beaufort expressed hope that by administering the fund, bishops will be able to reconcile with victims.

He said it is too early to estimate the number of eligible victims. The independent commission examining sex abuse announced at the Lourdes gathering that 2,800 people have responded since June to a call for testimonies.

An investigation by online publication Mediapart in 2016 found 342 cases of abuse over 50 years that French bishops allegedly covered up in France and abroad, implicating at least 34 priests.

Many of those priests were investigated and some were convicted. But for many victims, the statute of limitations on sex crimes against minors, which was extended from 20 to 30 years last year, allowed perpetrators to escape punishment.

Cases involving church sex abuse continue to work their way through French courts.

In one of the most high-profile cases, a French court convicted Cardinal Philippe Barbarin of failing to alert local authorities to accusations that a priest in his diocese sexually abused children. Barbarin, the archbishop of Lyon, appealed his six-month suspended sentence. A Lyon court is expected to render a verdict on Nov. 28.

French bishops had previously dragged their feet on recognizing the church's complicity in decades of sex abuse, arguing that bishops couldn't be held responsible for the actions of their priests.

Under pressure from victims, however, bishops began looking to other countries for guidance on how best to take action. Belgium and Switzerland, in particular, provided models of national compensation programs for victims.

Reckoning with sex abuse took on additional urgency after Pope Francis convened the Vatican's first-ever summit on the issue in February. At the gathering, which saw searing testimonies from victims across the world, Francis urged church leaders to take concrete action to confront the scandal.

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