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Vatican City — January 29, 2020
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Nine priests and brothers of a Catholic group recently shut down by the Vatican are under investigation by Italian authorities for allegedly sexually abusing two brothers, officials and news reports said Wednesday.

Prato Bishop Giovanni Nerbini confirmed that Prato criminal prosecutors had opened an investigation after he reported the case to police against members of the Disciples of the Annunciation community. He pledged the church's cooperation with the investigation.

The Vatican in December officially dissolved the Disciples, a Prato-based, diocesan-approved association of the faithful, after two successive Vatican investigations uncovered a host of problems and members fled the group.

The Vatican has closed or taken over several of these new associations and Catholic movements in recent years after a variety of abuses emerged, including sexual abuse and abuse of authority by their often-charismatic leaders.

The Prato daily La Nazione said the nine under investigation for sex abuse included five priests, a brother and three religious order priests.

The Italian church has only recently begun to reckon with the problem of clergy abuse after years of covering it up and denying that it was a problem.

Nerbini's press conference was unusual, suggesting that Italian bishops were beginning to deal with the sex abuse scandal more transparently and actively reporting cases to police.

Clergy are not mandated to report child sex abuse in Italy. Victims have long demanded that the Italian hierarchy compel bishops and religious superiors to report suspected abuse to police even without the legal requirement.

The diocese of Prato put out a press release noting that Nerbini on his own brought the case to Prato authorities in December. His predecessor had not done so when he received the victim's complaint in June, reporting it only to the Vatican as required under the Catholic Church's in-house canon law.

A canonical investigation is under way as well, Nerbini said.

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