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In a first public attempt to put numbers to instances of child sex abuse by the country's Catholic clergy, Spain's Episcopal Conference revealed Friday, April 23, that 220 cases were officially reported to the Vatican over the past two decades.

The conference, which is the top governing body of Spain's Catholic Church, said Spanish bishops submitted 76 allegations against regular priests and 144 against members of specific religious orders to the Vatican's office that handles sex abuse cases since 2001.

The figures didn't include allegations against non-clergy members of the church or staff working in the numerous schools run by religious orders. And the number didn't include the number of allegations the bishops actually received, just the number of cases that they determined were worth reporting to the Vatican, as required by a 2001 Holy See rule.

Officials said that 151 of the 220 cases have already been closed and 69 of them remain open. They provided no further details.

The Spanish Episcopal Conference's spokesman, Luis Argüello, argued at a press conference that the problem of sex abuse was not an exclusive problem of the church and that the priests involved in the allegations were a fraction of the 31,000

who had worked in the country over the past 20 years.

He also told reporters that Spanish prosecutors had investigated in the same period some 220,000 allegations of child abuse among the general population.

But he acknowledged that the church had been reluctant to address the issue in the past. The Vatican only requires allegations that have a semblance of truth to be reported in-house, not to police.

"We reckon that at certain times we have walked too slowly, we even looked away in another direction," Argüello was quoted as saying by Europa Press, a private news agency.

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The partial disclosure came after Minister of Social Rights Ione Belarra reacted to the passing of a draft on a new child protection act in parliament the previous week singling out the Catholic Church as "an accomplice in sexual violence against children."

It also followed the publication of a database of abuse instances recorded independently by Spain's leading El País newspaper, which lists a total of 309 cases involving 817 victims.

El País on April 23 reported that the bishops' information was "an enormous step in the slow acknowledgement of the dimension of abuses within the Spanish Church."

But the newspaper criticized the fact that their caseload was based on records from the Vatican and not on the allegations made directly in their own dioceses, including cases reported to the offices for the attention of victims opened last year at the request of Pope Francis.

Investigations by some national episcopal bodies across Europe have brought to light thousands of cases of children and teenagers allegedly abused by members of the Catholic Church — and have opened the door for other victims to come forward.

But Argüello told reporters that the bishops' governing body in Spain has "no intention, as of now, of opening any investigation."