News



Olivier Savignac, right, one of the victims, greets an attendee during the publishing of a report by an independant commission into sexual abuse by church officials (Ciase), Tuesday, Oct. 5, 2021, in Paris. A major French report released Tuesday found that an estimated 330,000 children were victims of sex abuse within France's Catholic Church over the past 70 years, in France's first major reckoning with the devastating phenomenon. (Thomas Coex, Pool via AP)

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An estimated 330,000 children were victims of sex abuse within France's Catholic Church over the past 70 years, according to a report released Tuesday that represents the country's first major accounting of the worldwide phenomenon.

The figure includes abuses committed by some 3,000 priests and other people involved in the church — wrongdoing that Catholic authorities covered up over decades in a "systemic manner," according to the president of the commission that issued the report, Jean-Marc Sauvé.

The head of the French bishops' conference asked for forgiveness from the victims, about 80% of whom were boys, according to the report. The bishops are meeting Tuesday to discuss next steps.

The independent commission urged the church to take strong action, denouncing "faults" and "silence." It also called on the Catholic Church to help compensate the victims, notably in cases that are too old to prosecute via the courts.

"The consequences are very serious," Sauvé said. "About 60% of men and women who were sexually abused encounter major problems in their emotional or sexual life."

"We consider the church has a debt towards victims," he added.

The 2,500-page document was issued as the Catholic Church in France, like in other countries, seeks to face up to shameful secrets that were long covered up.

Victims welcomed the report as long overdue.

Francois Devaux, head of the victims' group La Parole Libérée (The Liberated Word), said it was "a turning point in our history."

He denounced the coverups that permitted "mass crimes for decades."

“But even worse, there was a betrayal: betrayal of trust, betrayal of morality, betrayal of children, betrayal of innocence,” he said, calling on the church for compensation.

Olivier Savignac, the head of victims association Parler et Revivre (Speak Out and Live Again), contributed to the investigation. He told The Associated Press that the high ratio of victims per abuser was particularly “terrifying for French society, for the Catholic Church.”

Savignac assailed the church for treating such cases as individual anomalies instead of as a collective horror. He described being abused at age 13 by the director of a Catholic vacation camp in the south of France who was accused of assaulting several other boys.

“I perceived this priest as someone who was good, a caring person who would not harm me,” Savignac said. “But it was when I found myself on that bed half-naked and he was touching me that I realized something was wrong.…And we keep this, it’s like a growing cyst. It’s like gangrene inside the victim’s body and the victim’s psyche.”

The priest eventually was found guilty of child sexual abuse and sentenced in 2018 to two years in prison, with one year suspended.

The commission worked for 2 1/2 years, listening to victims and witnesses and studying church, court, police and news archives starting from the 1950s. A hotline launched at the beginning of the review received 6,500 calls from alleged victims or people who said they knew a victim.

Sauvé denounced the church’s attitude until the beginning of the 2000s as “a deep, cruel indifference toward victims.”

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The report says an estimated 3,000 child abusers - two-thirds of them priests - worked in the church during the seven-decade period. That figure is likely to be an underestimate, Sauvé said. The tally of victims includes an estimated 216,000 people abused by priests and other clerics, he said.

The estimates are based on research led by France's National Institute of Health and Medical Research into sexual abuse of children in the French population.

"Sometimes church officials did not denounce (sex abuses) and even exposed children to risks by putting them in contact with predators," Sauvé said. "We consider ... the church has a debt toward victims."

The president of the Conference of Bishops of France, Eric de Moulins-Beaufort, said the bishops "are appalled" at the conclusions of the report.

"I wish on that day to ask for pardon, pardon to each of you," he told the victims.

Sauvé said 22 alleged crimes that can be pursued have been forwarded to prosecutors. More than 40 cases that are too old to be prosecuted but involve alleged perpetrators who are still alive have been forwarded to church officials.

The commission issued 45 recommendations about how to prevent abuse. These included training priests and other clerics, revising Canon Law — the legal code the Vatican uses to govern the church — and fostering policies to recognize and compensate victims.

The report comes after a scandal surrounding now-defrocked priest Bernard Preynat rocked the French Catholic Church. Last year, Preynat was convicted of sexually abusing minors and given a five-year prison sentence. He admitted abusing more than 75 boys for decades.

The Preynat case led to the resignation last year of the former archbishop of Lyon, Cardinal Philippe Barbarin, who has been accused of failing to report the abuses to civil authorities when he learned about them in the 2010s. France's highest court ruled earlier this year that Barbarin did not cover up the case.

French archbishops, in a message to parishioners read during Sunday Mass across the country, said the publication of the report is "a test of truth and a tough and serious moment."

Pope Francis issued in May 2019 a groundbreaking new church law requiring all Catholic priests and nuns around the world to report clergy sexual abuse and cover-ups by their superiors to church authorities.

In June, Francis swiftly rejected an offer from Cardinal Reinhard Marx, one of Germany's most prominent clerics and a close papal adviser, to resign as archbishop

of Munich and Freising over the church’s mishandling of abuse cases. But he said a process of reform was necessary and every bishop must take responsibility for the “catastrophe” of the crisis.