News



A cross is seen at the Shrine of Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal in 2017. (CNS/Reuters/Pedro Nunes)

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The Portuguese bishops' conference announced the creation of a national commission to support local dioceses in their investigations into current and historic cases of sexual abuse.

The new commission, which was announced Nov. 11 at the end of the bishops' four-day plenary assembly in Fatima, was established after a discussion devoted to "the protection of vulnerable minors and adults in the ecclesial sphere and in society as a whole," the conference said.

"Recognizing the work of the diocesan commissions, made up especially of laypeople qualified in various areas such as law, psychiatry and psychology, the assembly decided to create a national commission to strengthen and expand the handling of cases and the respective follow-up at the civil and canonical level," the bishops said.

The creation of the new commission comes after an independent report on sexual abuse in the French Catholic Church released last month estimated that as many as 330,000 children had been abused by priests or church workers in France since the 1950s.

After the release of the French report, a group of more than 200 Catholics in Portugal sent a letter to the country's bishops calling for a similar investigation into sexual abuse in the church, which they called a "systemic" problem.

According to the Reuters news agency, the letter warned that while only a dozen cases of sexual abuse by members of the clergy were reported in the last decade, the number may be much higher.

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At a news conference Nov. 11, Bishop José Ornelas Carvalho of Setúbal, president of the Portuguese bishops' conference, told journalists the commission will have "real independence" and that the country's bishops were committed to ensuring "clarity" on the issue of sexual abuse.

"We will do everything to fully clarify this issue. Whatever needs to be done, we will do; about this, I don't have the slightest doubt," Ornelas said.

Ornelas denied that bishops intend to "cover anything up" and said it was important for the commission to carry out its work with full "freedom of thought and action" in its search for the truth.

"We are not afraid, and we have every interest in clearing all this up. This must be clear to everyone," the bishop said.

The Portuguese bishops' conference said the commission will not only be able to assist in investigating current cases but will also conduct a study of past cases "in order to clarify the history of this serious issue."

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