News
Vatican



From left, Mons. Olivier Leborgne, Bishop of Arras and Vice-President of the French bishops' conference, Mons. Eric de Moulins-Beaufort, archbishop of Reims and President of the French conference of bishops, and Monsignor Dominique Blanchet, bishop of Creteil, talk to reporters at the end of a press conference, in Rome, Monday, Dec. 13, 2021. (AP Photo/Andrew Medichini)

Nicole Winfield

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Pope Francis agreed Monday to meet with the commission that published a ground-breaking report into clergy sexual abuse in the French Catholic Church and, separately, expressed “sadness” over the sudden downfall of the archbishop of Paris, according to French bishops who met with him.

Archbishop Éric de Moulins-Beaufort, president of the French Bishops Conference, told reporters that Francis had agreed “in principle” to meet with the independent commission members but that a date had to be found.

The head of the commission, Jean-Marc Sauvé, had said the members would be received by the pope. But the reported Dec. 9 date came and went without an audience.

The French report estimated that some 330,000 children were victims of sexual abuse by Catholic clergy, scout leaders or other Catholic-affiliated lay employees from 1950-2020.

The estimate is based on broader research by France’s National Institute of Health and Medical Research into sexual abuse of children in the country,. Yet the methodology of the report has been criticized since the estimates are far higher than other similar national reports into the problem in the Catholic Church.

French bishops, however, have accepted the report and vowed to try to repair the damage, announcing they will compensate victims even by selling off assets given the church’s “institutional responsibility.”

Francis has said he hadn’t read the 500-page report, which so far is available in its entirety only in French. But Moulins-Beaufort said Francis appreciated “the dignity of our attitude” by making victims “the focal point” of the church’s response.

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“He encouraged us and thanked us,” the archbishop said.

He said he and his fellow bishops also asked Francis if he had anything to add about the sudden resignation of the archbishop of Paris, Monsignor Michel Aupetit.

Francis on Dec. 2 removed Aupetit from the influential post after the 70-year-old Aupetit offered to step down over media reports that he had a sexual relationship with a woman in 2012. Aupetit agreed he had an “ambiguous” relationship but denied it was sexual. French media also said there were governance problems in the archdiocese.

Francis on Dec. 6 said he had accepted the resignation because the “gossip” about Aupetit had made it impossible for him to govern the archdiocese. He said he had accepted the resignation “not on the altar of truth but on the altar of hypocrisy.”

The comment raised eyebrows, since it implied that Francis was willing to act on mere gossip. It also suggested that Francis blamed some in the French clergy for exposing Aupetit’s sins while hiding their own.

Moulins-Beaufort said Francis paid tribute to Aupetit’s pastoral efforts and “just told of his sadness from the situation and from the decision he had to make.”

Aupetit has lashed out at the French media coverage of his downfall, which in the past week has included an unsubstantiated allegation in the Paris Match tabloid of another inappropriate relationship with a consecrated virgin. During his farewell Mass last week, Aupetit recalled that one headline had said he had “lost himself because of love."

“It's true, it's true," he said to applause from the pews. “The archbishop of Paris lost himself because of love ... for Christ."