News



Cardenal Juan Jose Omella, center, speaks during a press conference in Madrid, Spain, Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022. (AP Photo/Paul White)

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MADRID — A Madrid-based law firm will conduct a year-long inquiry into past and present sexual abuse committed by Spain's Roman Catholic clergy, members of religious orders, teachers and other people associated with the church, the law firm and the head of the country's bishops' conference said Tuesday.

The public announcement marked a departure from the previous position of the Spanish Episcopal Conference, which for years rejected the idea of taking a comprehensive approach to investigating sex abuse. Still, it was met with skepticism by some victims who considered it misguided.

Cardinal Juan José Omella, the conference's president, said the goal of the inquiry by law firm Cremades & Calvo Sotelo "is the help and reparation of the victims, establishing new and additional channels to collaborate and denounce in addition to those existing in over 40 offices established by the Church."

The inquiry is intended to cover all abuse and is not limited to investigating only cases in a certain time period, according to Javier Cremades, the law firm's founder. It is also meant to complement separate initiatives launched by Spanish authorities, he and Omella said.

Cremades said, as a faithful Catholic himself, he was both overwhelmed by the task and "convinced that the Church must go to the end, get to the bottom, investigate, beg for pardon, if it's necessary, and rectify everything that is necessary."

He said his firm would act pro-bono and only seek for the Episcopal Conference to pay logistical costs or the fees of external advisors.

Spanish lawmakers are expected to vote in March on the terms of a parliamentary investigation into the depths of the sexual abuse committed by Catholic clergy. The Spanish government has proposed having the country's ombudsman lead that inquiry.

Although some bishops and religious orders had said they were open to an inquiry, the Spanish Episcopal Conference previously rejected a comprehensive investigation, instead encouraging victims to report their allegations to diocesan offices.

Asked by The Associated Press about the change in approach, Omella said that the inquest was the result of long reflection and internal debate.

"It's not easy to take a quick decision," the cardinal said. "What's important is not looking at the past, which is something typically Spanish, but to the future."

"What we care about is that we are opening a new era: we want to help, accompany and clear up everything," he said.

Sexual abuse survivors were lukewarm to the announcement.

Fernando García Salmones, a spokesperson for the Robbed Childhood Association, called it a "maneuver to deter attention" because the Church would dictate its terms to the law firm. He also said that Cremades, being connected to the ultra-conservative Opus Dei Catholic order, deprived the process of legitimacy.

"Would you task a study about the mafia's crime to the Corleone family?" said García Salmones, who is among a few victims in Spain who have received compensation from a religious order.

"They only worry that their business keeps flowing," he added, referring to the many properties and Catholic schools managed by the Catholic Church in Spain. "They don't care about children or about the abused."

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Pressure on the bishops to act has been growing as more victims have come forward publicly with their accounts of abuse. Spanish media have also revealed how the church's hierarchy dismissed many of the allegations, ignored the victims and obstructed investigations, often moving such priests to new parishes or overseas missionary stints, where they could perpetuate their abuses.

The country's leading newspaper, El País, has documented more than 600 cases involving twice as many victims, although the real number is believed to be much higher. And the prosecutor's office recently disclosed that 68 cases of abuse in religious organizations — not only Catholic — were currently under investigation.

Since assuming the papacy in 2013, Pope Francis has tried to sensitize the church to the problem of clergy abuse and passed laws to hold the hierarchy accountable for covering it up. But progress has varied country by country.

The German Catholic Church also commissioned law firms to conduct its inquiries into abuse. A recent one accused the former pope, Benedict XVI, of botching four cases when he was archbishop of Munich.

However, recourse to law firms doesn't always produce the results that victims want. A first report about abuse in the Cologne archdiocese in 2021 was refused by the archbishop, who commissioned another law firm to prepare a second report, which cleared him of wrongdoing.

Only a handful of countries have had government-initiated or parliamentary inquiries into abuse like the one that left-wing lawmakers are promoting in the Spanish parliament. The most extensive one prepared by the Australian Royal Commission, the highest form of inquiry in that country, that found 7% of Catholic priests there were accused of abusing minors between 1980 and 2010.

Judge-led investigations in Ireland produced four mammoth reports since 2005 into the church's wretched record in dealing with predator priests, helping to dismantle the Catholic Church's once-dominant influence in Irish society and politics.

The French Catholic Church commissioned an independent inquiry headed by a former vice president of the Council of State, who tapped a variety of experts to investigate. Their report, which was based on estimates and not just church case files and victim testimony, estimated some 330,000 children were victims of sexual abuse by Catholic clergy, scout leaders or other Catholic-affiliated lay employees from 1950-2020.

The Italian bishops conference is under pressure to accept some type of an inquest, but there has been no movement to approve such an inquiry.

In the U.S., grand jury investigations in Pennsylvania and in individual cities have revealed the extent of abuse locally, while individual lawsuits and criminal prosecutions produced copious amount of previously secret church files.