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Screenshot of the Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency for The Catholic Church Bishops' C

The Catholic Church renewed its apology to child sex abuse victims of following the publication of a report that claimed sexual offenses against children in the U.K. were at epidemic proportions. (CNS screenshot/Bishops Conference of England and Wales)

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The Catholic Church renewed its apology to child sex abuse victims following the publication of a report that claimed sexual offenses against children in the U.K. were at epidemic proportions.

An Oct. 20 statement issued by the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales offered an "unreserved apology" to abuse victims of clergy and church employees and volunteers.

The statement, posted on the bishops' conference website, also said the church wished to reaffirm its commitment "to the continued refinement and improvement of our safeguarding work to protect all children and the vulnerable."

The apology follows the Oct. 20 publication of a report by the panel of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sex Abuse after seven years of investigations of child abuse in British institutions, including several Catholic and Anglican dioceses and Catholic religious communities.

Presenting the report to journalists, Alexis Jay, chairwoman of IICSA, said the inquiry uncovered "shocking and deeply disturbing" evidence of child abuse, which, she said, was not a historical aberration but "an ever-increasing problem and a national epidemic."

"Deference was often shown to people of prominence, including councilors, MPs (members of Parliament) and leading clergy by those whose job it was to investigate allegations," she told the British media. "Even when they tried to investigate thoroughly, they were often told by their superiors to back off."

The inquiry took evidence from 725 witnesses in 325 hearings, while the testimonies of 6,000 abuse survivors were collected separately.

Jay said evidence suggested that the scale of abuse was so severe that in every 200 children, about 10 boys and 30 girls would suffer from sexual abuse before they were 16 years old.

The report made 20 recommendations, including a new law to make reporting of any abuse allegations mandatory. The government promised to respond to the proposals within six months.

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In its statement, the bishops' conference said it welcomed the report and promised to "carefully study its contents and recommendations."

"At no point will the church stop on its journey of dedicated effort in making the life and work of the church safe for all," the statement said.

"Before the publication of the case study report into the Roman Catholic Church in November 2020, the church commissioned an independent review into its safeguarding work and structures which is in the process of being implemented," it said.

"The new national safeguarding body, the Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency, which began operational work in April 2021, provides a regulatory function to organizations within the Church in England and Wales ensuring that standards are upheld, and all safeguarding processes adhered to. These changes were fully aligned with the inquiry's recommendations in the case study report."

The statement added: "Key to this progress is the voice of victims and survivors of abuse, which has been an integral element in the development of this new agency. The church remains committed to listening with humility to those who have been hurt by the actions of church members so that their experiences will inform our work."

Earlier, the inquiry criticized the Catholic Church in England and Wales.

In a 2020 report dealing specifically with abuse in Catholic institutions, IICSA revealed that between 1970 and 2015 the church received more than 900 complaints involving more than 3,000 instances of child sexual abuse against more than 900 individuals, including priests, monks and volunteers.

In the same period, the report said, there were 177 prosecutions resulting in 133 convictions, with millions of pounds paid in compensation.

Cardinal Vincent Nichols of Westminster, president of the bishops' conference, was singled out for criticism by the inquiry, which found that he showed neither compassion nor leadership in confronting the problem in at least two instances.