News

An older white man holds a candle while standing outside in a crowd at night

People participate in a candlelight vigil in Lisbon, Portugal, Feb. 22, 2023, in support of the more than 4,800 children that were sexually abused by members of the Portuguese Catholic Church, according to the commission investigating the issue. An independent commission in Portugal, investigating cases of clergy sexual abuse from the past, submitted its report Feb. 13. (OSV News photo/Pedro Nunes, Reuters)



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Portugal's Catholic Church has reiterated new safeguarding commitments in line with an independent commission on sexual abuse by clergy, although most of its dioceses also reported inconsistencies in the commission's findings.

"We renew our gratitude for the work carried out, which has made it possible to cross reference information between victim testimonies and data from our archives,"

the Portuguese bishops' permanent council said March 14.

"We value public scrutiny and are fully available to walk with society in eradicating the drama of abuse against minors, permanently supporting victims and judging aggressors. We regret that, given the subject's complexity, we have not always communicated our intentions clearly," it said.

The council issued the statement after meeting at the Marian shrine of Fatima to debate responses to a list of names of suspected abusers submitted to the church.

It said an autonomous group of trusted figures would be set up to work with existing diocesan protection committees, adding that bishops' conference guidelines on abuse also would be updated and steps taken against named abusers.

However, a church expert said problems had been identified with the names submitted by the independent commission, as well as with its reliance on anonymous testimonies.

"While the church's canon law has been amended to allow victims to present their cases anonymously, this poses an obstacle under civil law," Octávio Carmo, chief editor of the Portuguese Church's Ecclesia information agency, told OSV News March 16.

"Some sections of the Catholic community also think anonymous allegations shouldn't be acted on, and it seems the victims will at some point have to present themselves -- without this, I can't see how the dioceses can take canonical action, unless those accused admit their guilt."

The Independent Commission for Studying Sexual Abuse of Children in the Catholic Church, headed by Pedro Strecht, presented a 500-page report Feb. 13, noting it had validated 512 testimonies of abuse submitted Jauary 2022 to October 2022 and would submit a list of still-living clerical abusers to judicial authorities and the Catholic Church.

At a March 3 meeting, the bishops thanked victims for coming forward "in many cases after a silence preserved for decades," and said Portugal's 21 Catholic dioceses had now received the list of alleged abusers, and would analyze it with "firmness, clarity and determination" in line with "canonical and civil norms in force."

However, the Ecclesia agency said only 17 of the 98 priests named by the commission were still working as priests, with others now deceased, unidentified or no longer in priestly ministry.

Nine accused clergy had been "removed" from office, Ecclesia reported, by the dioceses of Vila Real, Braga, Guarda, Évora and, most recently, Porto, which had requested additional information from the commission "to determine possible measures to be applied."

In a March 10 statement, Portugal's Lisbon Archdiocese said only five of 24 priests listed by the commission were still serving, while the Beja Diocese reported March 15 that all five priests named by the commission, with cases dating back to 1963, were now dead.

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The diocese added that none had been linked with abuse in its files, whereas four known local cases of abuse investigated in 2001-2020 had not appeared in the commission report.

"All denunciations communicated to or on file in the Diocese of Beja have received due follow-up, and there is no current case awaiting action," the diocese said in a statement signed by Bishop João Marcos.

"It is thus completely impossible to carry out any investigative steps, although we express our commitment, zeal and determination to provide necessary support to any victim we can identify," the statement said.

Portugal's Público daily reported Feb. 22 that only a handful of the 512 abuse testimonies validated by the commission, covering the years 1950-2022, had been ruled eligible for investigation by the public prosecutor's office, given the country's statute of limitations, the absence of "sufficient evidence" and the impossibility of identifying victims and perpetrators.

In an OSV News interview, Octávio Carmo, the Ecclesia agency's editor, said many Portuguese citizens had formed the impression from the commission's report that over 100 accused priests were still active in the country's dioceses.

"Although the commission subsequently conceded it had listed clergy who could now be deceased, since their victims might still be living, it seems this clarification failed to register with public opinion," he said. "The resulting mistakes and inconsistencies have become an issue, although this shouldn't be used as a justification for not addressing the wider problems."

Independent commissions have been asked to study clerical abuse by bishops' conferences in France, Germany and Spain, while Poland's Catholic bishops confirmed March 14 they would also appoint a team of historians, lawyers and psychologists to examine archives on "sex crimes by clergy against minors."

Carmo told OSV News the Portuguese commission has not adopted the method of statistical averages and algorithms used by an October 2021 church-commissioned report in France, which estimated extensive child abuse since the 1950s.

"Our commission used direct testimonies, and didn't try to compare these against population levels -- it also focused on recommendations for action, rather than presenting a list of potential criminals," the Ecclesia editor said.

"We're identifying the problems, taking responsibility, drawing the necessary conclusions and changing what needs to be changed to ensure a better future," he added.

In its March 14 statement, the bishops' permanent council said the Portuguese Church was at "a point of no return" and would act on the commission's report, adding that care for victims, including "forms of reparation for crimes committed," would remain the church's priority, with a national day of prayer and commemoration planned for April 20.

The Ecclesia agency said special training on abuse prevention would be given to staffers and volunteers ahead of the pope's arrival for the church's Aug. 1-6 World Youth Day in Lisbon, during which a monument to abuse victims will be unveiled at the bishops' conference headquarters.