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A bald person is seen from behind wearing white and a stole and bowing their head

A priest prays inside Sacred Heart Basilica in Paris Oct. 6, 2021. Victims of clerical sex abuse have bitterly criticized plans by France's Catholic bishops for all clergy to include a scannable QR code on their identity cards certifying whether they face restrictions for crimes or misdemeanors. (OSV News photo/Sarah Meyssonnier, Reuters)



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Victims of clerical sex abuse have bitterly criticized plans by France's Catholic bishops for all clergy to include a scannable QR code on their identity cards certifying whether they face restrictions for crimes or misdemeanors.

"If this move is aimed at regaining public trust, I don't think it'll prove effective," said François Devaux, co-founder of the Parole Libérée (Liberated Word) association,

formed in 2015.

"Meanwhile, if the church is professing greater transparency, this merely shows its leaders have understood nothing. An independent report in 2021 (published in France) made 45 recommendations for countering abuse -- I think the church should implement these before it adds a 46th."

The lay Catholic, who was one of dozens abused as children by a currently jailed Lyon-based priest Fr. Bernard Preynat, was reacting to plans by the bishops' conference in France for priests' traditional accreditation documents, or "celebrets," to be replaced by digital cards linked to a central church database.

In an OSV News interview, he said the proposed system, requiring the checking of barcodes before a bishop or priest could celebrate Mass, was a "mark of despair" and revealed "an institution which has strayed a long way from the Bible."

Meanwhile, a former victim in neighboring Switzerland also dismissed the French initiative as "well-intended but empty," and told OSV News he hoped church leaders in other countries would not emulate it.

"The existing celebret documents haven't always been used anyway -- and while this new idea may reflect goodwill, it won't stop pedophiles," said Daniel Pittet, a university librarian and author of "Father, I Forgive You," detailing his rape by a Catholic priest during childhood.

"If priests are to have new IDs in a centralized computer network extending throughout France, every sacristy and parish office will have to be equipped with digital card readers and high-tech devices. This, of course, is an impossible dream," Pittet stressed.

The new cards will use a traffic-light system -- with green designating a clear record, amber partial restrictions, and red a ban on public ministry -- and were among measures first approved by France's bishops at a November 2021 plenary, following a damning report on clerical sex abuse.

Speaking at a May 10 Paris press conference, Bishop Alexandre Joly of Troyes said France's 13,000 Catholic priests and 3,000 permanent deacons would receive the cards by the end of 2023, and would be asked to present them to organizers of Masses, pilgrimages and other church events, with print versions in areas without

internet access.

He added that the cards would be updated annually by dioceses and religious orders, and immediately if restrictions were imposed on a holder, but would be open to scrutiny only by parish, cathedral or sanctuary rectors, not by the general public.

"Faced with cases of sexual violence, the church of France is now digitizing the professional IDs of bishops, priests and deacons, to prevent them celebrating when sanctioned," Joly told journalists.

"Families need to know the church is not a place of danger. … Respect is also due to victims who rightly cannot understand why someone who has committed serious acts can continue to perform Mass or hear confessions," he said.

However, the president of another victim group, Parler et Revivre (Speak and Relive), Olivier Savignac, told Agence France-Presse (AFP) he doubted elderly parish priests would be able to operate the new system, adding that French dioceses should instead compile online offender lists, like those of the United States.

Meanwhile, the director of the Catholic Témoignage Chrétien weekly, Christine Pedotti, said France's church was "making progress" against abuse by encouraging victims to speak out, but also voiced doubt about the new cards.

"Bishops are expected to manage several hundred priests today, without any real way of controlling them -- it's about time they were equipped with modern tools," Pedotti told AFP.

"But this measure offers a small tool when compared to the scale of the problem. … The French church hasn't provided an answer to one fundamental question: Why do some priests think they are gods and can avail themselves of other people's bodies?"

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In his OSV News interview, Devaux said most pedophile clergy had already been identified in church archives and dossiers, adding that the new digital cards showed "how far trust has broken down with the faithful."

Meanwhile, Pittet said the new system would require "an immense follow-up," when many suspended priests, denied permission to officiate, were still celebrating Mass.

"Such people already have celebret documents, which will need updating and adapting, and I doubt the French church has the means to do this," said the 63-year-old married father of six, who is to be ordained a deacon in September by Bishop Charles Morerod of Lausanne, Geneva and Fribourg.

"It's good to see the church confronting and tackling its many faults. But many foreign priests are also coming here, particularly from Africa, requiring checks on their clerical status and psychological health, while others have avoided accountability for years. Against such a background, this scheme is just a drop in the ocean of what's needed."

Firmer anti-abuse measures were among 45 recommendations made in October 2021 by an Independent Commission on Sexual Abuse in the Church (CIASE), which estimated 330,000 children had been abused by Catholic priests and church employees in France since the 1950s.

French dioceses are selling assets to finance compensation payments, in line with the CIASE recommendations, as well as ensuring judicial verification for anyone working with minors.

In December, the bishops' conference set up the world's first major national church court, tasked with judging "canonical offenses by clergy and laity," while at a March 28-31 plenary, it outlined further steps against sexual abuse, including a wealthier endowment fund for victim reparations and greater lay participation in episcopal councils.

In an eight-page dossier, published May 10, the bishops said the new digital cards would provide access, via smartphones or tablets, to a secure national directory of all clergy working in France, but also would respect personal confidentiality by not specifying the nature of any restrictions.

It added that the card would parallel IDs used by journalists and lawyers, certifying "that a priest has been validly ordained and is attached to a diocese or community," and preventing "impostors (false priests or deacons) from acting to the detriment of the faithful and sacraments."

In his OSV News interview, Devaux said CIASE had recommended reducing the "total power" of priests over their communities, as "incarnations of the sacred."

However, he added that he feared bishops abroad would be tempted to follow the latest French initiative, adopting digital IDs as a means of "avoiding the need for deeper, fundamental transparency."

Meanwhile, Pittet said he also feared the French card would only work effectively if a worldwide digital network was created to monitor the Catholic Church's 400,000 priests.

"The church has made immense efforts since I myself was abused 40 years ago -- it knows much better now, at least here in Europe, what it has to do," the Swiss librarian told OSV News.

"But terrible stories are still emerging, and priests are still being ordained who are pedophiles or violators of women. We need to take clergy down from their pedestal and stop idealizing them."

The controversy coincided with a May 13-16 Vatican visit by 30 French bishops for a "working session" on sexual abuse.

A previous group of bishops, who received their own digital cards in March, traveled to Rome in February, while a third will attend a working session in July.