News



People protest with signs against sexual abuse by a priest outside the Bolivian Archbishopric office in La Paz, Bolivia, Friday, May 19, 2023. Milton Murillo, a Bolivian priest, has been remanded in custody on suspicion of abusing seminarians a decade ago, shortly after news broke of what has turned out to be the largest pedophilia scandal in the Andean country's history, involving the deceased Jesuit priest. (AP Photo/Juan Karita)

Carlos Valdez

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La Paz, Bolivia — May 25, 2023

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Leaders of the Roman Catholic Church in Bolivia acknowledged May 24 that the church had been deaf to the suffering of victims of sexual abuse, commenting as a pedophilia scandal involving priests is rocking the country.

In a statement, the Andean nation’s Catholic bishops said that "as a church, we are facing a painful moment ... because we are certain that we have been directly or indirectly involved in the deep pain caused to innocent victims."

The statement comes amid the fallout from the case involving a late Spanish Jesuit priest, Alfonso Pedrajas. According to a private diary accessed by the Spanish newspaper El País, Pedrajas allegedly abused dozens of minors in Catholic boarding schools in Bolivia in the 1970s and 1980s. He died of cancer in 2009.

Earlier this week, Jordi Bertemeu, one of the Vatican’s top sex crimes investigators, arrived in Bolivia.

The bishops said that while "we know there is no way to compensate for the damage caused, we are committed to do everything possible to … seek a reparation, with the support of professionals who provide assistance and help heal wounds and scars."

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The Prosecutor’s Office initiated an investigation — which remains confidential — and has called on the victims to testify. New cases of sexual abuse have been uncovered as a result of this probe and one priest was sent to pre-trial detention for three months earlier this month.

Bolivian President Luis Arce sent a letter to Pope Francis earlier this week, requesting that the church release any documents about sexual abuse by priests in Bolivia.

In the letter, Arce calls on church authorities to "move from pronouncements to concrete actions to prevent impunity."

In their statement, the Bolivian bishops said the church would set up two commissions to "determine responsibilities." They promised to provide updates, saying they would "contribute to a transparent investigation" by the justice system.

The Jesuit Society in Bolivia previously apologized to victims and pledged to support the investigation while denouncing Pedrajas’ superiors for an alleged cover-up. Many of the people singled out are no longer in office or have died.