News

A white man's hands are folded as he stands in intricately embroidered white vestments. His

A clergyman is pictured in a file photo during a procession outside the Basilica of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Siluva, Lithuania. With an open letter, Catholics in Lithuania have urged their bishops to set up an inquiry on sexual abuse in the church, in the wake of scandals that shocked the Catholic community. (OSV News photo/Ints Kalnins, Reuters)



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Catholics in Lithuania have urged their bishops to follow other countries' example in setting up an inquiry on sexual abuse in the church in the wake of scandals that shocked the Catholic community.

"The faithful have numerous unanswered questions, and public trust in the institutional church is diminishing," they said in an open letter. "Recent experience

by local churches across Europe and the world shows the most productive way to reunite the Catholic community, reclaim society's trust and heal wounds is through investigations by an independent commission of experts. Only with the revelation of past events, acknowledgement of guilt, compensation of victims and an examination of conscience is a new path forward made possible."

The letter, signed by over 150 Catholic professors, school directors, media workers and public figures, as well as priests and nuns, said recent abuse cases from Vilnius and other dioceses had been confirmed by court hearings. The letter added that the pope had warned that failure to act to stop this evil and to come to the aid of its victims would sully the church's "witness to God's love."

"Widely publicized events related to sexual crimes by clergy have shaken the Catholic community in Lithuania," said the letter, addressed in early July to the country's seven diocesan bishops and the Vatican's Canadian-born nuncio, Archbishop Petar Rajic.

"Only the most reliable knowledge and complete transparency can help avoid lies, ambiguities and cover-ups in future -- alongside an effective system of preventing and reporting inappropriate behavior and assisting victims," it said.

Clerical abuse was highlighted in May, when the Vilnius Archdiocese's chancellor, Fr. Kestutis Palikša, was sentenced to a 4,000-euro ($4,348) fine for purchasing child pornography on his computer, after police searched his curia offices following a tip-off from a former victim, who claimed to have been paid for sex at age 15.

A separate charge of forcing a minor to have sexual relations was dropped for lack of evidence, and the priest, who contested some accusations, is currently suspended pending a Vatican ruling.

In a June 2 statement, Archbishop Gintaras Grušas of Vilnius, president of the Lithuanian bishops' conference, said he had not been present during the police raid, and had not known the "real reasons" for it.

He added that he had later launched an internal investigation into Palikša's offenses, but regretted he had not "delved deeper," and said he now apologized to the victim and to "the community of believers and brother priests" who felt "betrayed and let down."

"I failed to be a good pastor -- to see all those entrusted to me and protecting the weak," said Grušas, who also heads the Council of European Bishops' Conferences. "No matter what I say, it will not atone for the damage caused by the inappropriate behavior of clergy or other church servants towards minors and the vulnerable."

However, the press spokesman for Lithuania's neighboring Kaunas Archdiocese, Darius Chmieliauskas, told OSV News there had so far been no official church reaction to the open letter, adding that he had signed it himself, after notifying his ordinary, Archbishop Kestutis Kevalas, hoping "serious preventive action" would now be taken.

Meanwhile, another signatory said she feared church leaders would ignore the letter, adding that Catholics would go on "demanding action, rather than words."

"We demand transparency from state officials and should expect the same from our bishops -- although the Vilnius case struck a strong negative chord because it involved such a senior figure, there've been others too," Ruta Tumenaite, who heads Catholic programs in Lithuania's state radio, told OSV News July 5.

"But while younger people agree we can't ignore something damaging trust in the church, many older Catholics see any criticism as an attack on the Christian faith, insisting priests are mediators between God and people and should be left to deal with this problem themselves," she added.

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The Catholic Church nominally makes up four-fifths of the 2.73 million inhabitants of Lithuania, a member of NATO and the European Union, and was much praised for heroic spiritual resistance under Soviet rule, which lasted until the country regained its independence in 1991.

In 2018, after abuse claims were made against another Vilnius priest, Grušas asked people to report clergy crimes to both church authorities and law enforcers, while in 2020, church leaders passed the material to the Vatican on two priests accused of sharing child pornography.

Calls for an independent commission on clerical abuse parallel moves by bishops' conferences in France, Germany, Portugal and Spain. Meanwhile, Catholic bishops in

neighboring Poland confirmed March 14 they also would appoint a team to investigate "sex crimes by clergy against minors."

Vatican procedures for tackling abuse, set out in 2011, also require bishops' conferences to draw up their own guidelines for preventing abuse and caring for victims in cooperation with Vatican dicasteries. In 2019, Pope Francis issued the motu proprio "Vox Estis Lux Mundi" ("You are the light of the world"), outlining global legal procedures for how the church should deal with clergy sexual abuse, including procedures for investigating bishops. In June 2022, the pope promulgated an updated version of the recommendations.

In his June 2 statement, Grušas thanked journalists and prosecutors for highlighting Palikša's crimes and said he had written to the government of Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonyte, asking for "all cases where priests are prosecuted" to be reported to the church in line with Lithuania's May 2000 treaty with the Holy See.

However, he added that current Lithuanian church guidelines were "insufficient" for dealing with current complaints, and said he would put together a team to "build an effective prevention, whistleblowing and victim support system," learning from other countries.

"Any measures, even the most rigorous training programs, will be fruitless if their implementation isn't regularly checked -- so at least once a year, we will report to the public about the activities performed," Grušas said. "The church is a community of sinners who seek holiness with God's help -- but this latest case reminds us of the need for repentance, conversion and renewal."

In their open letter, Catholics said an independent commission should be led by a publicly trusted "impartial academic expert" without institutional links to the church, and given "access to all necessary data, including archival ones," by local bishops.

Meanwhile, Tumenaite told OSV News the letter was not intended as "mass petition," but said signatories would, if necessary, follow the "inspirational example" of Catholics in Poland, who had "done their own research on available church archives" when requests for accountability were ignored by church leaders.

Chmieliauskas said clerical abuse appeared less widespread in Lithuania than in some Western countries, because the Catholic Church ran fewer schools and institutions involving contact with children.

However, he added that it was essential for victims to come forward and said "proactive initiatives" like the open letter would help "pressure the church to do something."

"We know our own guidelines need reworking with help from legal and pastoral experts both here and abroad," the Kaunas Archdiocese spokesman said. "But this means agreeing on current needs, defining positions and taking adequate, concrete decisions. We must wait and see what the bishops propose, and what those involved in the open letter do next if no action is taken."

A Lithuanian bishops' conference statement said a church seminar on "protection from sexual exploitation" and "assuring a safe environment" had been held with a Vatican expert for bishops, lawyers, psychologists and pastoral workers June 28-29 in the Panevežys Diocese, and had discussed improved guidelines, help for victims and selection of priesthood candidates.