News

Bishops line up around Pope Francis in apostolic library.

Pope Francis poses for a photo with bishops of Italy's Emilia Romagna region, including Cardinal Matteo Zuppi of Bologna, making their "ad limina" visits to the Vatican Feb. 29, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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The Italian bishops' conference will "soon" begin a pilot program to research cases of alleged abuse against minors that were reported to diocesan authorities between 2001 and 2021, said the new president of the conference's commission for the protection of minors.

The pilot study will be conducted by independent experts from two national-level research institutes, said Chiara Griffini, a psychologist and psychotherapist, who was named to head the commission May 24.

The experts will conduct a multidisciplinary, quantitative and qualitative study and analysis of cases reported to diocesan bishops in Italy with results expected by the end of 2025, she said May 29 during a conference on abuse against minors in Italy.

The conference, sponsored by the Italian bishops' conference and the Italian Embassy to the Holy See, included talks from an Italian police officer whose department deals with Internet crimes, a lawyer and safeguarding expert for minors in the world of sports, and experts working with abuse hotlines for children.

Cardinal Matteo Zuppi of Bologna, president of the bishops' conference, had told reporters in 2022 that the bishops had agreed to study clerical sexual abuse cases that had been reported to the Vatican Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.

"The analysis will be conducted in collaboration with independent research institutes," a statement from the conference had said, with the hope that it would enable the bishops to have "a deeper and more objective knowledge of the phenomenon" so they can improve prevention programs and procedures for handling allegations.

The bishops' initial plan had been to gather the information directly from the dicastery, which is where every diocese in the world is required by church law to report allegations of abuse against minors by clerics. But Griffini said researchers will gather information about the cases sent to the dicastery directly from the bishops.

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Researchers will start with an "experimental" phase involving just a few of the country's 226 dioceses to see how to proceed with the study, she told reporters. From there, the plan is to expand to include more dioceses to get "a photograph" of all reported cases sent to the dicastery.

The idea, she told reporters, is to study and analyze who were the victims and the alleged perpetrators and how the church responded to the allegations. It will cover only cases sent by bishops to the dicastery, and not include cases handled in other ways, such as allegations of abuse by clerics made only to civil authorities.

The two research institutes the team of experts will come from, she said in her talk, will be the department within Italy's Ministry of Labor and Social Policy that deals with children and adolescents and the University of Bologna's interdisciplinary research center on "victimology and security."

Zuppi had said in 2022 that the independent research institutes "will direct the study, not us. … We are not looking for someone to tell us what we want to hear; that is not even in our own interests."