News



Bishop Artur Wazny of Sosnowiec, Poland, is seen in a May 18, 2024, photo in a Polish Television studio in Warsaw, Poland. Taking over one of the most troubled dioceses in the country, Bishop Wazny announced June 19, three days short of his June 22 installation, that he established an independent commission to investigate abuse of power and sexual scandals in his new diocesan home. (OSV News/Hubert Szczypek, courtesy Polish Television)

Paulina Guzik

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Sosnowiec, Poland — June 25, 2024
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Taking over one of the most troubled dioceses in the country, Bishop Artur Wazny of Sosnowiec didn't waste time ahead of his June 22 installation.

Just days short of his official start in the diocese, Wazny announced he has established Catholic Poland's first independent diocesan investigation commission. "It's about the truth," he told OSV News.

During his June 22 installation at Sosnowiec cathedral, Wazne said, "we are not a church that has fallen and can no longer rise. We want to be a church that, having experienced such great difficulties, can get up by the power of the cross of Jesus." Presiding at his installation Mass was the papal nuncio to Poland, Archbishop Guido Filipazzi.

Pope Francis accepted the resignation of Wazny's predecessor, Bishop Grzegorz Kaszak, after a priest organized a "sexual orgy," as reported by Polish media. The nunciature did not indicate in an Oct. 24, 2023, statement the reasons why Kaszak resigned at age 59 — years before he reached age 75, the age when canon law requires bishops to submit their resignation to the pope — but commentators in Poland indicated it was a "fast-track" resignation in a diocese causing major scandal in the country.

For months leading up to Kaszak's resignation, the media reported on abuse of power, homosexual relationships between clergy, and sexual parties organized in priests' apartments. In March 2023, a deacon was shot dead by a priest who later committed suicide. In March 2024, two months before Wazny's May 8 canonical assumption of the diocese, a young man died after a party in the priest's apartments — a case currently being investigated by state prosecutors.

In a statement released June 19, the Diocese of Sosnowiec in southern Poland's Silesia region announced that the commission will investigate cases "that have recently stirred up public opinion."

"It is about the truth, and without the truth love is not possible, and the mission of the church is not possible," Wazny told OSV News. "And hence the point is to reach this truth, even if it is very painful, because then we will be faced with the fact that certain things need to be resolved, settled, atoned for, repented for and started anew," he said.

The new bishop of Sosnowiec appointed a retired prosecutor, Violetta Guia, from the nearby city of Katowice, as chairwoman of the investigative body. The committee also will include specialists in secular law, church law, history and archival studies, psychology and psychotherapy, and communications, the diocese said in a June 19 statement.

Additionally, an external audit will be conducted to address "pastoral, financial, legal, administrative and personnel" issues, the June 19 statement said.

Both investigators and auditors will begin their work in September, after establishing a full list of members.

In what is a first for the church in Poland, the commission will investigate abuse of power and sexual relationships of clergy in a transparent way and, for the first time, external, lay law enforcement experts will lead the probe.

"In Poland we say that there is no need to break down an open door," Wazny told OSV News, noting the commission is based on U.S. diocesan best practices in investigating and auditing abuse cases.

"I think sticking to the truth always gives freedom," Wazny told OSV News. It is a "sign of prudence" to learn from U.S. best practices, he added.

Referring to past experiences of the U.S. church from which he learned, Wazny said he has the sense of "freedom that I am not in some kind of a dark tunnel and I do not know where to walk, but I have a certain light and so with this light, I want to follow."

After the sexual abuse crisis broke in the U.S. in 2002, the bishops hired lay law enforcement experts, such as retired FBI agents, to oversee the investigations and had an outside lay organization conduct audits of dioceses' compliance with protocols for addressing abuse. Kathleen McChesney, a senior FBI official, was the first head of the U.S. bishops' Office (now Secretariat) of Child and Youth Protection.

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On March 14, 2023, the Polish bishops announced they would start a process to establish a nationwide commission to study the Polish church's abuse crisis in this regard — four years after major media reports on abuse and its cover-up by the church — but the details on when the commission could start its work and who would lead it are not known.

Regarding the commission he has established, Wazny said that it's "some kind of pioneering experience." He hopes it "inspires that maybe it is worth going down this path" and that other bishops "will also follow it."

Wazny said he made the decision on both the commission and the audit thinking "about the good of the church," but most of all "about the good of people who were hurt and were not listened to, were not taken care of in some way. This is also an important motive for me."

Wazny emphasized that for him learning what happened is an important step for transparency, accountability and responsibility in the church, but he also wants the diocese to be surrounded by prayer.

He asked the Carmelite Sisters of Kharkiv, who had to flee Ukraine at the beginning of the war in February 2022, to be permanently based in Sosnowiec and pray for the diocese.

"I would like them to be in the heart of the diocese, so that their prayer radiates," he said, adding that he is looking for a convenient home for the sisters, who for the last two years did not have a permanent home in Poland and were living temporarily in the nearby Archdiocese of Czestochowa. "I ask many laypeople to pray too," Wazny said.

"We're all in this together," he said.

"Too many things were based on priests in the past," he said. "That is the clericalism that Pope Francis has talked about so often. And now it's the painful situation that forces us to become the kind of church that Jesus wants, where the laity works together with the clergy.

Asking mostly lay experts to make up the commission, he said it's the "laity discovering by virtue of their baptismal involvement in the church that they don't bail out the priests, but that these are their own tasks to perform," and the priests "don't bail out the laity in some areas they often don't know about, but deal with their mission as those who are in the priesthood of service."

"Paradoxically this crisis becomes an opportunity," Wazny told OSV News. "If this is what the crisis is supposed to look like, then thank God that we are in this situation."