News



Abbé Pierre, a well-known activist for the poor and the homeless who died in 2007 at the age of 94, is pictured in this Oct. 3, 2002, file photo. French Catholics were shocked to learn July 17, 2024 of the "sexual assault or sexual harassment" allegations against the famed priest. (OSV News/Philippe Wojazer, Reuters)

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As the Emmaus Community for the poor investigates accusations of sexual abuse against its once-iconic, now disgraced, founder Abbé Pierre, the case made international headlines as Pope Francis commented on it while on his return voyage to Rome from Asia last week. A few days later, the French national daily Le Monde published an editorial by the president of the French bishops' conference, which urged the Vatican to cooperate in an investigation.

As the pope's September 2024 trip to Asia began, the Emmaus Community announced that new accusations of sexual abuse of women and children had been made against the priest, and French media reported that church officials and leaders of the community had tried to cover up allegations as far back as the 1950s.

"We must speak clearly on these things and not hide them," Francis said. "Abuse, in my judgment, is something diabolical" because it attacks the sacredness and God-given dignity of another person.

The priest, who died in 2007 at the age of 94, was a former Resistance fighter and member of parliament. In 1949, he founded the Emmaus Community for the poor. Well-known in France, the association went on to expand internationally. Abbé Pierre was admired at home and abroad far beyond the church.

It was his own community, Emmaus — both its international and French branch, along with the Abbé Pierre Foundation — that informed about the accusations and results of an investigation into the allegations of abuse committed against "several women" between "the end of the 1970s and 2005," the organizations said in a joint July 17 statement.

The Emmaus movement confirmed the testimonies included accounts of abuse of a minor at the time of the events. It announced the creation of a commission of independent experts to continue the investigation.

In a Sept. 6 statement, the French bishops' conference declared their "full cooperation" with the investigation and expressed its "dismay at these new revelations and above all a deep compassion towards all those who are victims of these actions," the bishops said.

In a following statement on Sept. 16, the bishops said they would make the archives from their National Center of Archives of the Church of France, and those of all dioceses, available to the Justice Department, expert members of the commission announced by Emmaus, researchers and authorized persons — including to the journalists investigating Abbé Pierre.

"Without this lifting, these documents would not have been available for consultation until 75 years after the death of Abbé Pierre, i.e. the year 2082," the French bishops said.

During his in-flight press conference Sept. 13, Francis said that "the sexual abuse of children, of minors, is a crime.'

After answering two other questions, Francis returned to the topic of Abbé Pierre to tell the reporter, "I don't know when the Vatican came to know about it. I don't know because I wasn't here, and I never thought to research it, but certainly after his death — that is certain."

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Publishing his editorial in the French daily Le Monde, Archbishop Éric de Moulins-Beaufort of Reims acknowledged that the Vatican may have had knowledge of Abbé Pierre's abuses, saying that he "respectfully" hoped "the Vatican will undertake a study of its archives and tell us what the Holy See knew and when it knew it."

The president of the French bishops' conference also confirmed that as early as 1955-1957, "at least some bishops knew that Abbé Pierre was behaving seriously towards women. Measures were taken, including psychiatric treatment. We may consider them insufficient, and regret that they were kept very confidential."

In his editorial, the archbishop of Reims said he hoped that it is clear the case reaffirms "the work of the Church in France to ensure that the truth is told about the

facts of sexual assault and violence, as well as the facts of spiritual domination, and to review its operations."

He also called on "all other institutions and organizations to do the same. We owe it to the victims."

The French bishops' conference president said that while Abbé Pierre was "France's favorite personality," now all need to ask themselves a question on how much they knew about his double life. "Numerous in-depth biographies have been written about Abbé Pierre, and films have been made about him, both during his lifetime and after his death. None of these studies or films reveals that he engaged in sexual abuse. This must be questioned," the archbishop stressed.

For de Moulins-Beaufort, the institutions for listening to and supporting victims of sexual abuse that have been set up in the church in recent years were "a huge social advance," and that "victims can finally speak out with the assurance of being heard and supported," admitting that this happened thanks to the pressure of the victims' associations.

Now it's time for a broader social awareness of sexual abuse prevention, the archbishop said.

"It's society as a whole that needs to ask itself what it's showing young people about sexuality, what it's preparing them for, and how it's preparing them for relationships that make them ever more human," de Moulins-Beaufort wrote in Le Monde.

"It's one thing to look for the culprits. Understanding how a man was left to his own evil impulses is a necessary task. Reflecting on what sexuality is, and how best to live with it, is a challenge for society as a whole."