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Clergy sex abuse survivor speaks while bishop looks on.

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Five years after the abuse crisis in the Catholic Church made national headlines in Poland, victims of abuse met with Polish bishops at the fringes of the plenary meeting of the bishops' conference — the first such official meeting of survivors with the bishops' body.

"I feel that it was a meeting with a capital 'M,' that is, a meeting where both sides are ready to hear each other. We indeed had a sense of being heard," said a woman known by the pseudonym of Toska Szewczyk, one of the initiators of the meeting. "There were comments from the bishops such as 'I already understand more why this is so important to you,' or 'We have indeed done what we need to do so far, but not necessarily all that we can.' Apologies were also made several times," she said.

"Both sides worked very hard" to organize this meeting, Szewczyk told the Polish Catholic magazine Wiez. It was a "human-to-human" meeting, not only bishops-to-survivors, she emphasized.

Poland's primate, Archbishop Wojciech Polak of Gniezno, and those affected by sexual abuse in the church assessed the meeting positively at a joint press conference in Czestochowa Nov. 19.

"I am very grateful that we have managed to take the bishops by the hand a little," Robert Fidura, an abuse survivor, said at the press conference. "We seem to be moving in the same direction and beginning to see certain things very similarly."

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> —Robert Fidura
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Another person involved, Jakub Pankowiak, called the meeting with the bishops "historic." He said he had the impression that it was now much easier to understand each other and to walk together.

"Before the meeting, we had a lot of concerns (the bishops probably did too). And here it turned out that on the other side there are also people with whom it is possible to have a dialogue and come to — at least partial — understanding. Differences remain large, but on some issues it even turned from two sides into one," he told Wiez magazine.

Polak explained that the bishops recognized the "great contribution" made by those affected by abuse to the protection of children and young people.

With the meeting on the fringes of a plenary assembly, which "most of the bishops attended" — confirmed by the spokesman of the Polish bishops' conference during the Nov. 19 press briefing — the Polish bishops fulfilled a central demand in a letter that victims of abuse had written to them in the spring.

"We organized this meeting together with representatives of victims, outside the plenary room so that it's more cordial, more personal and initiating real human conversation," Polak said.

In an unprecedented move, 46 victims signed the letter, published on May 20 — the first such large joint initiative of survivors of abuse in Poland since the crisis broke in 2019.

The letter had been sent to the Permanent Council of the Polish bishops' conference May 13, asking the Polish bishops for the suspension of Archbishop Tadeusz Wojda of Gdansk's duties as conference president "until the alleged negligence" in one of the cases he oversaw in his Archdiocese of Gdansk is clarified. If the allegations were proved, the letter recommended "removal of him from his position as president (of the bishops' conference)."

Wojda is accused of allegedly allowing a priest in his archdiocese to continue working with children, even though two women had reported him for sexual abuse in 2021. The archbishop had asked the Holy See for an investigation and is awaiting results.

The bishops did not comment during the press briefing on the demand to suspend their conference president, citing an investigation in progress.

The victims also urged the bishops in their letter to meet with their delegation at a plenary meeting "later in 2024" — a meeting that has just taken place in Czestochowa, at the Jasna Góra national Marian shrine.

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They also asked to issue an institutional letter to the Vatican "in support of the idea of changes in canon law," so that victims get "the status of a party," not witness, in canonical procedure. They also asked for involving "at least one woman in each diocese in the system for assisting the victims," and for a victims' ombudsman to be established to advocate for victims in church institutions.

The specific outcome of the meeting and the status of victims' demands were not assessed after the Nov. 19 meeting, but the victims said the meeting brought new hope.

In the five years since the crisis came to light in the country, the church in Poland has taken up many reforms, including initiating the St. Joseph Foundation in 2019, which finances therapy and other needs of abuse survivors, and setting up the Office of Delegate of Child Protection of the Polish bishops' conference — for which Polak

was reelected March 14. It has not, however, issued a national report on the scope of abuse, with the investigating commission being discussed, but not yet convened.