News



Archbishop Wojciech Polak of Gniezno, primate of Poland and delegate of the child protection office of the Polish bishops' conference, speaks during a press conference at Jasna Góra Marian shrine in Czestochowa, Poland, Nov. 19, 2024, accompanied by survivors of abuse. The day of prayer for victims of clerical sexual in the church in Poland, observed on the first Friday of Lent, was overshadowed March 7, 2025, by a negative opinion that the legal council of the Polish bishops' conference gave concerning the project of an independent commission to study scope and scale of abuse in the Catholic country. (OSV News/Courtesy of Polish bishops' conference)

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Krakow, Poland — March 10, 2025
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Poland's day of prayer for victims of clerical sexual abuse, scheduled each year for the first Friday in Lent, was overshadowed March 7 by a controversial opinion from the legal council of the Polish bishops' conference regarding an independent commission for the investigation of abuse cases that has been under development for the past two years.

According to the Polish Catholic information agency KAI, the legal council blasted several fundamental foundations of the "Commission of Independent Experts to Investigate the Sexual Exploitation of Minors in the Catholic Church in Poland," which had been approved by the bishops in June 2023.

The bishops' legal council opinion, which was sent to all curial offices Feb. 28, according to KAI, said that a critical vote and resolution taken on June 14, 2023 were actually invalid and would have to be repeated; cited potential lawsuits and other risks for bishops that could come from the commission's work; and took umbrage with the general guiding principles of the establishment of the commission.

The document was sent to the bishops so they "could familiarize themselves with it before the upcoming plenary meeting," to take place March 12-14 in Warsaw.

Two years ago, on March 14, 2023, the Polish bishops had announced the creation of this commission of experts to investigate cases of abuse of minors by clergy from the past in the country.

Commenting on the lawyers, Archbishop Wojciech Polak of Gniezno, who is a delegate of child protection of the Polish bishops' conference and outspoken advocate for the renewal of church culture in Poland, told KAI, "this is an opinion with which we will argue. It is not of a binding nature."

"It is difficult today to participate with confidence and in good faith in the services organized as part of the Day of Prayer and Solidarity with those harmed by sexual abuse," the initiative "Hurt in the Church," said in a March 7 statement. It is difficult to believe in real solidarity of the church in Poland with those harmed by abuse, the statement said, if the bishops' lawyers "recommend that the bishops break a public pledge made two years ago as they promised to establish a commission."

The initiative, founded in 2019 and known in Poland as "Zranieni w Kosciele," is available to help clerical abuse victims.

Members of the board of the initiative, consisting of longtime advocates for victims of abuse, said that they're "deeply disappointed and outraged" by the response of the bishops' legal council, and that "what shines through from these recommendations ... is the conviction that the good of the Church and the good of people who have been wronged ... are two contradictory values."

Robert Fidura is a victim of clerical sexual abuse and one of the organizers of the meeting of victims of abuse with the bishops at the fringes of the plenary meeting of the Polish bishops' at Jasna Góra sanctuary in Czestochowa on Nov. 19, 2024 — the first such official meeting of survivors with the bishops' body. He told OSV News March 7 the bishops' lawyers, questioning the document on establishing the commission, have acted "without empathy."

"When 24 hours before the day of solidarity and prayer for victims of abuse we learn that the lawyers of the bishops' conference question an initiative that would help the church heal and transparently talk about Polish cases, I am simply thinking — where is the truth," he said. "What do they really think of it? And is the day of prayer only good PR?"

Fidura said the Polish bishops "refuse to learn from the experiences of Western Europe," where reports have been issued in France, Germany, Spain and Portugal in recent years.

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The lawyers questioned the fact that the bishops would be investigated by the commission, saying that "the commission's actions could be judgmental over

individual church superiors, which only the Holy See is authorized to do," KAI reported. The legal council also pointed out "the risk" for the church of "working with organizations or individuals who may not necessarily have the best interests of the Church at heart."

Fidura commented that "this attitude is not new at all — American bishops were also reserved towards investigating 'clerics' — they instead put 'priests and deacons' in the Dallas Charter," he pointed out. But "the church has changed, we're 23 years after the Dallas Charter, there is Vos estis lux mundi, and we still have a problem with the laity holding the bishops accountable."

"The Polish bishops live in the church of the past," he added. "It's really last minute to move to the present."

Journalist Tomasz Terlikowski, who first flagged the document of the bishops' legal council in the Polish media, said "the document explicitly says that bishops should not be 'interrogated,' that they should not have to explain their own and their predecessors' mistakes, and that no one, least of all the laity, who cannot be audited, should judge them. And this is not a joke. These are facts."

He said that the matter is serious and at stake are "credibility and trust" to the church in Poland.

Spokesman of the Polish bishops' conference Father Leszek Gesiak commented that "this document is one of the opinions that are required in this type of discussion."

He assured that the establishment of the commission is on the bishops' agenda for the March plenary meeting.

"There is no doubt that the formation of the commission is a priority for the bishops," he told the Polish media March 6. "It is a well-known fact that this is also a hugely important issue for those who have been wronged. However, it is a very complex issue ... so its implementation is burdened with great responsibility," Gesiak said.

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, 2024. It has not, however, issued a national report on the scope of abuse, which the investigating commission is expected to work on.