News



Bishop Jean-Marc Micas of Tarbes and Lourdes is seen walking to the grotto in the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes in France Feb. 9, 2025. To mark a significant milestone reached in recent years, the country's bishops met in Lourdes with over 300 victims and experts to discuss the path forward in safeguarding — and challenges that they're still facing — March 31 and April 1, 2025. (OSV News/Courtesy of Lourdes Sanctuary)

Caroline de Sury

View Author Profile

OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Paris — April 8, 2025

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The French bishops' conference is entering a new era under Cardinal Jean-Marc Aveline of Marseille, following his election as president. This transition comes after years of focus on abuse reform and safeguarding.

To mark a significant milestone reached in recent years, the country's bishops met in Lourdes with over 300 victims and experts to discuss the path forward in safeguarding — and challenges that they're still facing.

On March 31 and April 1, the bishops welcomed victims, leaders of associations, experts and diocesan collaborators — groups who shared their experiences in roundtable discussions, led by journalists. Accompanied by the impressive crowd, the bishops took stock of the years of work that has mobilized them since 2018, and even more so since the publication of the report of the Independent Commission on Sexual Abuse, known as CIASE for its French acronym, on Oct. 5, 2021.

The report estimated that 330,000 children in France had been sexually abused since 1950 and provided the country's first accounting of the crisis. According to Jean-Marc Sauvé, who chaired the commission, Catholic authorities covered up the abuse for decades in a "systemic manner" in France.

For Bishop Renauld de Dinechin of Soissons, Laon and Saint-Quentin, a diocese northeast of Paris, "enormous progress has been made in recent years in the church in protecting minors and listening to victims."

"We are working in depth to establish healthy human relationships ... so that the Church is a safe place," he told OSV News. "We want the activities that we organize, pilgrimages, catechism, summer camps and spiritual retreats, to be a real place of protection for children. This is a very constructive line of work," the bishop said. "Our other mission is to set up structures to receive the victims and repair the violence they have suffered as much as possible, and structures to ensure that it does not happen again. This is painful, but we are very determined to do it."

The bishops of France are now working specifically to help those who have been abused as adults. "We want to support them in the necessary steps to obtain justice when appropriate," Archbishop Éric de Moulins-Beaufort of Reims, outgoing president of the French bishops' conference, explained at a press conference on April 4. "In cases where justice cannot be met, due to statute of limitations or the death of the guilty parties, we will resort to professional mediators from outside the church."

For de Dinechin, the fact that the victims' defense groups came to Lourdes to talk and work with the bishops was "a very positive sign."

"Four years ago, they refused to talk to us, they were that angry," he recalled.

Among the interlocutors of French bishops during their spring plenary was the Bétharram group, whose founder, Alain Esquerre, spoke at length during the week with de Moulins-Beaufort. He has filed 200 complaints in state courts in recent months, in the name of victims, for physical, psychological and sexual violence committed by religious and lay people against children at the Catholic school Notre-Dame de Bétharram, near Lourdes, from the 1950s to the 1990s. He continues to search for witnesses who have experienced similar abuse.

Advertisement

Since February, the Bétharram case has taken on a political dimension, with the involvement of French Prime Minister François Bayrou, who comes from the same region in the Pyrenées. His children were educated at Notre-Dame de Bétharram, which over the years changed its name to Le Beau Rameau Catholic School, and where his wife used to teach catechism class. The prime minister has been criticized for his lack of clarity and responsiveness on this issue.

"With this case, we are going beyond the question of the church and even the network of Catholic schools," de Dinechin pointed out. "The whole education system will have to question itself about the abuses. This issue makes the whole of society face up to its responsibilities."

For their part, the bishops published an official message to the Catholics of France on April 4, to be read and distributed in the parishes. One more time they officially invited people who have suffered physical or sexual violence in schools to report it

to the courts, to specialized associations, or to diocesan counseling services.

"Let us work together to make our Church safer," the bishops wrote. "We need the vigilance and commitment of each and every one of you so that our Church can face this crisis by allowing itself to be transformed."

Following the spring April 1-5 Lourdes assembly, the issue of Catholic schools will strongly mobilize the bishops in the years to come, de Dinechin pointed out.

The Catholic schools "are the target of strong political attacks that question the very existence of Catholic schools under contract of association with the state. This can be explained by the current tense context, in which Catholic schools are very popular, while public education is experiencing difficulties," the bishop told OSV News.

Bishop Matthieu Rougé, whose diocese of Nanterre neighbors Paris, and who is known for his knowledge of the political world, has been tasked with a new mission and will supervise the work that the bishops will undertake to regain control of the Catholic schools, and dialogue with the state authorities.

Meanwhile, on April 2, the bishops elected Cardinal Aveline as the new president of the conference. He will take office on July 1.

"This election was surprisingly quick and unanimous," de Dinechin told OSV News. "The cardinal is fraternal, joyful and encouraging, with a great intelligence. He is appreciated by all."

During a press conference on April 3, Aveline, who leads the archdiocese of Marseille, described as a priority for him to "cultivate collegiality among bishops."

"We all feel a vital need to talk to each other as bishops in today's tense context, and to have a space for sharing, reflection and prayer in common, so that we can discern together what we should say and do," de Dinechin confirmed.

Aveline also mentioned the very large number of requests for baptism preparation, which have continued to pour in over the past few months in almost all the dioceses of France.

"These people came to us from many other paths than those we had set out in our pastoral programs," the cardinal pointed out. "This invites us to humility. Our

responsibility is now to give them a place in the church."