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Pope Leo XIV greets Archbishop Thibault Verny of Chambéry, France, during a meeting at the Vatican June 5, 2025. The pope appointed Verny president of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, succeeding U.S. Cardinal Seán O'Malley. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Caroline de Sury

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Archbishop Thibault Verny of Chambéry, France, made international headlines as he succeeded one of the most acclaimed figures of church safeguarding in the world, Cardinal Sean O'Malley — retired archbishop of Boston — in his role as president of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors (PCPM).

Verny, 59, may be new to the universal church, yet he is a well-known figure in France and a bishop remembered for his firm stand against abusers in the Catholic Church.

Verny had been a member of PCPM since 2022. At the same time, in France, he had been president of the Council for the Prevention and Fight Against Pedophilia, within the French bishops' conference. After a full term on the body, on July 1, he was succeeded by Bishop Gérard Le Stang of Amiens.

Stéphane de Navacelle, a well-respected Parisian lawyer and member of the Independent Commission on Sexual Abuse in the Church, know by its French acronym CIASE, knows Verny very well, having had the opportunity to work with him closely.

The publication of the CIASE report in October 2021 had a decisive impact in France. The independent commission investigated sexual abuse cases committed in the church in France since the 1950s, and published 45 recommendations for the church to reform its structures and institutions, in order to effectively combat abuse within its own ranks.

Since then, many of the 45 recommendations made by CIASE report have been implemented, and for Navacelle, Verny has played a leading role in this, one he described as "obvious" and "undeniable."

"Even before the CIASE investigation, he was a pioneer in this field," Navacelle told OSV News. "He played a major role in creating an institutional framework to streamline relations between the Diocese of Paris and the judicial authorities,

thereby considerably strengthening the fight against sexual abuse. This then served as an example for other dioceses in France."

An engineer specializing in physics by training, Archbishop Verny had been ordained a priest for the diocese of Paris in 1998 and appointed auxiliary bishop of Paris in 2016. He had then been entrusted with the mission of combating abuse in the Catholic Church in France.

Before 2019, bishops in France were already required by French law to report cases of abuse that came to their attention. However, legal loopholes allowed dioceses to conduct internal investigations when they received indirect, unconfirmed, or vague reports, in order to verify the information before referring cases to the courts.

"Bishop Verny was quickly convinced that the church had neither the means, the time nor the expertise to investigate criminal cases on its own," Navacelle explained. "He clearly expressed his confidence in the French judicial system to conduct the preliminary investigations themselves."

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On Sept. 5, 2019, then-Archbishop Michel Aupetit of Paris and Rémy Heitz, public prosecutor of the French capital, ratified a protocol to systematize the transmission of reports of sexual abuse to the civil justice system. "That was unprecedented at the time," Navacelle insisted. "It was the first time in France that a public prosecutor's office and a diocese established their relations within such an institutional framework," he added.

"Since then, reports of sexual offenses that appear credible were quickly and systematically forwarded to the Paris public prosecutor's office. This allowed the authorities to conduct rapid and more accurate professional investigations, because they had powers and resources that the diocesan authorities lacked," Navacelle told OSV News.

"Bishop Verny played a major role in that," the lawyer emphasized. "I can testify that he is renowned for his irreproachable commitment to collaborating with the civil justice authorities. The seriousness and rigor he has shown in this collaboration are recognized at the highest levels in France."

After Paris, 17 dioceses in France had signed protocols with the judiciary before the publication of the CIASE report. The independent commission welcomed them and recommended that all dioceses sign similar agreements.

"This is now the case in the vast majority of dioceses," Navacelle said. "Bishops no longer need to conduct internal investigations," as this task now falls to the local law enforcement, the expert pointed out. "This allows them to obtain much faster and more reliable results, which either confirm the offenses or exonerate the suspects and confirm their innocence."

"This is thanks to Bishop Verny," Navacelle insisted. "He is an extremely intelligent man who has the intelligence to seek the help of competent people when it comes to subjects for which he is not qualified."

Navacelle also described Verny as "an extremely serious man," who is also "rigorous and uncompromising in matters of procedure, and a proponent of absolute transparency."

The lawyer said that this was especially visible when he and Verny were going through priests' files within the CIASE commission. "I could see that he had the qualities of discipline and rigor that are necessary to deal with the scale of the abuse case. What he put in place is working."

For Navacelle, despite recurring cases that still show errors of judgment and decision-making, the operating structures of church institutions in France are now considerably improved or on the way to being so. "Many bishops have taken things just as seriously as Bishop Verny," he said. "Today, coordination works very well in most dioceses with the public prosecutors."

"Of course, there are still cases where things do not go as well as we would like, and we must continue to work," Navacelle concluded. "But the procedures are now officially structured, clear and transparent. It can be said that today, in France, the dioceses are fully integrated into the civil and judicial structures of the republic. Those who work for the church are subject to the law like everyone else. This is what ... needed to be done."