Vatican

Vatican News



Pope Leo XIV presides over a Rosary vigil for peace in St. Peter's Square on the 63rd anniversary of the start of the Second Vatican Council, at the Vatican Oct. 12, 2025. (AP/Gregorio Borgia)

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Vatican City — October 16, 2025

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The Vatican's child protection board said Thursday (Oct. 16) the Catholic Church has a moral obligation to help victims of clergy sexual abuse heal, and identified financial reparations and adequate sanctions for abusers and their enablers as essential remedies.

The Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors focused on the issue of reparations in its second annual report. It's an often sensitive topic for the church, given the financial, reputational and legal implications it imposes on the hierarchy.

The report was significant — an official Vatican publication prepared with the input of 40 abuse survivors from around the world and giving voice to their complaints of how badly the church had handled their cases, and their demands of what they need to heal. It contained the shocking revelation that the Vatican office responsible for one-third of the world's Catholic dioceses had received only a "small number of cases," and only two reports of bishops who covered up child sex crimes.

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Pope Leo signals commitment to commission

The report covers 2024, a period before Pope Leo XIV was elected. History's first American pope has acknowledged that the abuse scandal, which has badly tarnished the credibility of the Catholic hierarchy in the United States, parts of Europe and Latin America, remains a "crisis" for the church.

Leo has signaled a commitment to the commission, which Pope Francis created in 2014 to advise the church on best practices to prevent abuse.

The report said monetary settlements were necessary to provide victims with needed therapy and other assistance to help them recover from the trauma of their abuse.

But it said the church owed a debt far greater to victims, the broader church community and God. The hierarchy must listen to victims and provide them with spiritual and pastoral assistance. Church leaders must apologize for the harm done,

tell victims what they are doing to punish those who harmed them and what measures they are taking to prevent future abuse, the report said.

"The church bears a moral and spiritual obligation to heal the deep wounds inflicted from sexual violence perpetrated, enabled, mishandled, or covered up by anyone holding a position of authority in the church," it said.

The report itself was prepared with victims in a focus group setting who listed priorities for their healing. They identified the need for accountability for church leaders, information about their cases, true reform of church structures to adequately punish abusers and their enablers, and effective prevention strategies.

"The commission is committed to saying to victims and survivors: 'We want to be by your side,' " the commission's new president, French Bishop Thibault Verny, told a Vatican press conference.



A cross outside the U.S. bishops' Office of Child and Youth Protection is covered with photos and prayers for the victims of clergy sexual abuse in a 2011 file photo. (CNS/Nancy Wiechec)

A legal process that is itself retraumatizing

Significantly, the 2024 report said the church's way of handling abuse cases, and its "decades-long pattern of mishandling reports, including abandoning, ignoring, shaming, blaming, and stigmatizing" victims, was itself retraumatizing for them.

It was a reference to the church's dysfunctional internal process and in-house canonical code, where it can take years to process a case and the most severe punishment meted out to a serial rapist priest amounts to being fired.

The process is cloaked in secrecy, such that victims have no rights to information about their case other than learning its outcome. Victims have no real recourse other than going public with their story, which can be retraumatizing.

The report called for sanctions that were "tangible and commensurate with the severity of the crime." While laicization is a possible outcome for priests who rape children, the church is often loathe to remove priests entirely. It frequently gives out lesser sanctions, such as a period of retreat away from active ministry for even gross cases of abuse.

Even when a bishop is removed for bungling cases, the public is only told that he has retired. The report called for the church to "clearly communicate reasons for resignation or removal."

> "The commission is committed to saying to victims and survivors: 'We want to be by your side.' "
>
> — French Bishop Thibault Verny
>
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An audit of countries and Vatican office

The report provided an audit of child protection policies and practices in over a dozen countries, as well as within two religious orders, a lay movement and the Vatican office responsible for the church in the developing world.

It gave high marks to the church leadership in Malta, South Korea and Slovakia, where most if not all dioceses responded to the commission's questionnaire about prevention policies and practices.

But even in Italy, the Vatican's backyard, only 81 of 226 dioceses responded to the questionnaire. In places like Mali, the challenges seem even greater to even disseminating information that prevention policies exist: the bishops' conference website "does not seem to be functioning and accessible."

The report contained the stunning fact that the Dicastery for Evangelization's missionary office, which is responsible for 1,124 dioceses in Asia, Africa, Oceania and parts of Latin America — or a third of the church's dioceses — had received only a "small number of cases," and only two reports of bishops who covered up.

That is a staggeringly low number given the size of the territory involved. It suggests the Vatican still has a long way to go in parts of the world where abuse, especially same-sex abuse, remains a taboo topic in the wider society and where the church is confronting broader issues of war, conflict and poverty.

Commission member Benyam Dawit Mezmur, an Ethiopian jurist, said he cringes when he hears the church claim there are no abuse cases when the real problem is that cases are not being reported. A lack of resources in these poor churches and societal and cultural impediments are mostly to blame.

"I know for a fact that there are cases," he said. "But we need to look deeper and see why they are not being reported. Are the structures in place? Are there issues about reprisals? Are there issues that we need to address about power relations?"

He said key to encouraging a culture of reporting was empowering minors and their families to report abuse and educating them about child protection and prevention.