Vatican

Vatican News



Pope Leo XIV leaves at the end of an audience on the occasion of the Jubilee of the Choirs in St. Peter's Square, at the Vatican, Saturday, Nov. 22, 2025. (AP/Alessandra Tarantino)

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Pope Leo XIV on Saturday accepted the resignation of an ailing Spanish bishop who is under church investigation for allegedly sexually abusing a young seminarian in the 1990s, the first known time the new pontiff removed a bishop accused of abuse.

A one-line statement from the Vatican said Leo had accepted the resignation of Cádiz Bishop Rafael Zornoza, 76. It didn't say why, but Zornoza submitted his resignation to the pope last year when he turned 75, the normal retirement age for bishops.

It hadn't been accepted though until the El País newspaper reported earlier this month that Zornoza had been recently placed under investigation by a church tribunal. The daily, which since 2018 has exposed decades of abuse and cover-up in the Spanish Catholic Church, said Zornoza was accused of abusing a young former seminarian while he was a young priest and directed the diocesan seminary in Getafe.

The report, quoting a letter the former seminarian wrote the Vatican over the summer, said Zornoza fondled him and regularly slept with him from when he was 14-21 years old. The former seminarian's letter said Zornoza heard his confession and persuaded him to see a psychiatrist to "cure" his homosexuality.

The diocese of Cádiz denied the accusations against Zornoza but confirmed the investigation was being carried out by the church court in Madrid known as the Rota. In a Nov. 10 statement, the diocese said Zornoza was cooperating with the investigation and had suspended his agenda temporarily "to clarify the facts and to undergo treatment for an aggressive form of cancer."

"The accusations made, referring to events that took place almost 30 years ago, are very serious and also false," the statement said.

It is believed to be the first publicly known case of a bishop being retired, and being placed under investigation for alleged abuse abuse, since the Spanish church began reckoning in recent years with a decades-long legacy of abuse and cover-up that have rocked the once-staunchly Catholic Spain.

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Leo didn't immediately name a temporary leader of the diocese.

In 2023, Spain's first official probe of abuse indicated that the number of victims could run into hundreds of thousands, based on a survey that was part of a report by the office of Spain's ombudsman. The ombudsman conducted an 18-month independent investigation of 487 cases involving alleged victims who spoke with the ombudsman's team.

Spain's Catholic bishops apologized but dismissed the interpretations of the ombudsman report as a "lie," arguing that many more people had been abused outside of the church.

The Spanish Catholic hierarchy then did its own report, saying in 2024 that it had found evidence of 728 sexual abusers within the church since 1945. It then launched a plan to compensate victims, after Spain's government approved a plan to force the church to pay economic reparations.