News



The president of the Spanish Episcopal Conference, Luis Arguello, centre and Jesus Diaz Sariego, President of Spain's Conference of Religious Orders, left, take part in a press conference in Madrid, Spain, Tuesday, July 9, 2024. (AP/Paul White, File)

Joseph Wilson

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Nicole Winfield

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Associated Press

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Spain's Catholic bishops agreed Thursday to let the Spanish government's ombudsman have the final say in the church's compensation of victims of sexual abuse by clergy members who have died or whose possible crimes are too old to be prosecuted.

The agreement, which envisages a one-year window for claims, marks a rare concession by the Catholic hierarchy. It is aimed at resolving disagreements between the left-wing government and church authorities over reparations after victims criticized the church's original in-house compensation proposal.

The Spanish bishops conference said in a statement that the new agreement will allow victims who don't want to seek help directly from the church to turn to the government and the state's ombudsman, who has taken a lead role in shedding light on abuse. The ombudsman will evaluate the claims and ultimately will have the final say on any possible awards.

Spain's Justice Minister Félix Bolaños said in a press conference in Madrid that "hundreds" of victims whose aggressors had passed away or were now very old could finally receive recognition of the abuse and receive economic reparations paid by the church.

"Today, we have paid a debt to the victims," Bolaños said. "It is true that the State has acted late, but we are acting now. Yesterday, the victims couldn't do anything because these crimes had proscribed."

While church authorities in many Western European countries have created compensation plans for abuse victims, either run by the church or independent experts, the Spanish process is unusual because of the involvement of the state itself in the process.

The troubled path to reach a deal

In recent years, the once staunchly Catholic Spain has begun to reckon with a decades-long legacy of abuse by priests and cover-up by generations of bishops and religious superiors, mainly thanks to the initial reporting by newspaper El País.

Spain's parliament tasked the Spain's ombudsman to investigate and in 2023 the ombudsman delivered a damning 800-page report that investigated 487 known cases of sexual abuse and included a survey that calculated the number of possible victims could reach the hundreds of thousands.

Spain's bishops rejected that estimate by the ombudsman, saying its own investigation had uncovered 728 sexual abusers within the church since 1945. It said that most of the crimes had occurred before 1990 and that 60% of the aggressors were now dead.

In 2024, the government announced its intention to force the church to compensate victims. That was followed a few months later by the bishops saying they were creating a special committee to hear from victims, assess their claims and ensure their "economic, spiritual and psychological" reparation.

But victims' groups were critical of the bishops' plan since it relied on them approaching the church and had no outside oversight.

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Ombudsman has the final word

On Thursday, Archbishop Luis Argüello, the president of the Spanish Episcopal Conference, acknowledged that some victims didn't feel comfortable approaching the church offices. Now, victims can turn to the government instead.

Under the new agreement, victims can approach Spain's Justice Ministry with their initial petition. The ministry will pass it on to the ombudsman, who will study it and propose a compensation package that the church's committee will then assess. If no agreement can be reached with the church and the victim, the case will go to a joint committee with representatives of the church, the ombudsman's office and victims' associations. If that committee can't agree, the ombudsman's decision will stand, Bolaños said.

The victims' association Robbed Childhood said that it supported the arrangement, after it had criticized the church-only plan for lacking oversight.

"We consider it to be completely positive," association spokesman Juan Cuatrecases told The Associated Press. "We believe it was time for the victims whose cases had been proscribed to see the truth served."

The window for filing claims will be open for one year. After that, the agreement can be extended for an additional year if needed, according to Bolaños.

In addition to victims' groups and the Spanish bishops, Bolaños thanked the work of late Pope Francis and Pope Leo XIV in uncovering abuse in the church.

Argüello said the church had already paid out 2 million euros ($2.3 million) in compensation after taking up petitions by more than a hundred victims since its special committee opened in 2024.

Payments to victims will be free of taxes in the new deal.

Compensation programs vary worldwide

Only a handful of countries have had government-initiated or parliamentary inquiries into clergy sex abuse, although some independent groups have carried out their own investigations.

The issue of compensating victims of abuse has long vexed the church, with wide disparities in programs and payouts around the world. In the United States, where the abuse scandal erupted in 2002, litigation, settlements and abuse compensation programs have cost the church billions of dollars and led several dioceses to seek bankruptcy protection.

Elsewhere, church-run compensation programs have awarded smaller amounts to victims and paired financial reparations with services offering therapy and spiritual assistance. The French church, for example, paid out an average of about 35,000 euros ($41,000) to each of the 358 victims whose claims were received in 2023. Compensation awards were approved in 2024 for another 489 people, 88 of whom were given the maximum 60,000 euro ($70,000) claim, the church reported.

The Vatican's child protection advisory board said in its report last year that the Catholic Church had a moral obligation to help victims heal, and that financial

reparations for the abused, and tougher sanctions for the abusers and their enablers were essential remedies.