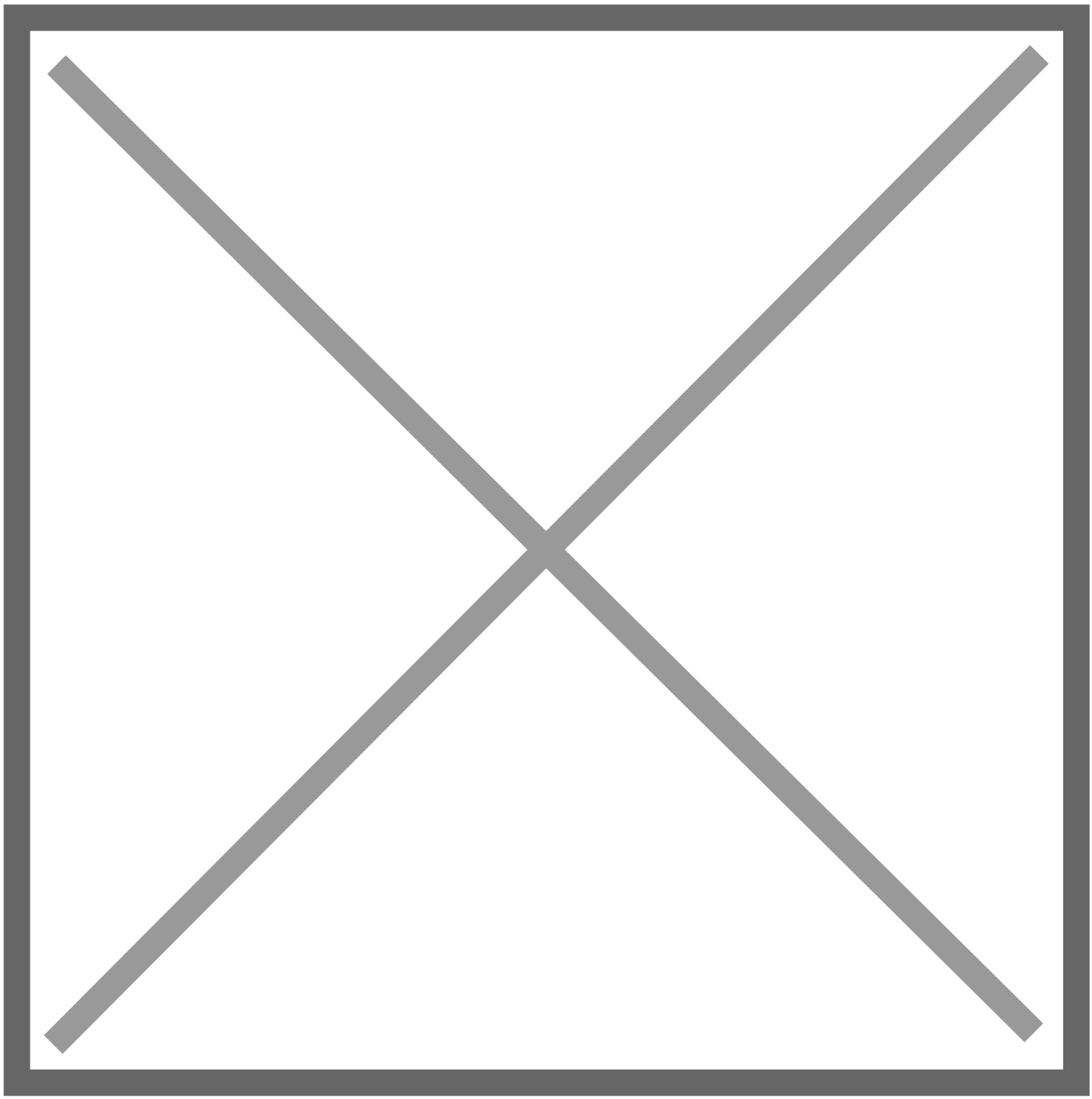
News



Bishop Artur Wazny of Sosnowiec, Poland, is seen May 18, 2024, in a Polish Television studio in Warsaw. A newly released clerical sexual abuse partial report in Poland's Diocese of Sosnowiec is being described by investigators as a necessary step toward accountability, while Church leaders call it a painful but essential moment in rebuilding trust after years of scandals in the diocese. (OSV News/Courtesy of Polish Television/Hubert Szczypek)

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A newly released clerical sexual abuse report in Poland's Diocese of Sosnowiec is being described by investigators as a necessary step toward accountability, while Church leaders call it a painful but essential moment in rebuilding trust after years of scandals.

The partial report, published Feb. 12 by the independent commission "Explanation and Repair," documents at least 50 identified victims of sexual abuse of minors and highlights systemic failures in how allegations were handled over decades.

The report found that approximately 3.2% of almost 600 priests incardinated into the diocese since its founding in 1992, were involved in abusive behaviors — with some cases of abuse committed by Sosnowiec's priests before the establishment of the diocese.

Bishop Artur Wazny of Sosnowiec framed the publication of the partial report as a moment of "deep pain," "shame" and "necessary purification."

"The report is not an act of accusation nor a defense strategy. It is a painful confession of faith that only truth — even the most difficult truth, hidden under layers of dust in disordered archives — can set us free," the bishop said.

"In the center of this report are not the names of perpetrators, but the pain of the harmed and their loved ones," he said, mentioning that "66% of those harmed are girls and 96% are under 15 years of age."

These are "concrete human fates, fractured biographies, ruined childhoods and shaken trust in God," Wazny said.

"For years, the Church system, instead of protecting you, often protected itself," he said, speaking directly to victim-survivors. "I apologize for every moment when the Church, instead of being a home, became for you a place of darkness," Wazny said, promising to "try to heal these wounds with you."

The Diocese of Sosnowiec, created in southern Poland's industrial Silesia region in 1992, has faced a series of clergy misconduct controversies in recent years that drew international attention and added to an already shattered reputation of the Church in the country.

Pope Francis accepted the resignation of Bishop Grzegorz Kaszak of Sosnowiec on Oct. 24, 2023, in what was considered a fast-track for bishop resignations, after a priest organized a "sexual orgy" in the diocese, as Polish media described it.

The Diocese of Sosnowiec saw a series of homosexual scandals among priests, followed by suicides and even a homicide, which the commission is investigating on parallel tracks with the state prosecutor — but those findings, along with bishops' accountability matters, will be presented in the final report, for which, commission members say, "months" of work are still needed.

BWazny, who took over the troubled diocese after Bishop Kaszak, announced he would commission an independent report just days short of his official installation in June 2024, telling OSV News at the time, "It's about the truth."

Monika Przybysz, a theologian, crisis communications professor at Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski University in Warsaw and a member of the commission, said the investigation intentionally focused first on victims — leaving homosexual scandals for a second part of investigation.

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The first, partial report "is devoted to the most difficult and at the same time most sensitive topic — the harm done to a child," Przybysz told OSV News.

"Sexual abuse of minors is most often a trauma for a lifetime. That is why this issue demanded urgent action from us," she said, adding that commission members prioritized reaching out to victims and their families, even though not all were ready to speak.

She said the commission feared some older cases may soon reach the statute of limitations. "For that reason, we began not with systemic issues," such as orgies notoriously depicted in the Polish media, "but with the most sensitive cases. This report is for us an opening one," she said.

Przybysz said Wazny faced a decisive moment upon taking office.

"He stood at a point in the life of the diocesan community," she said, "where he had only two options: either to begin explaining all these scandals in the diocese in order to conduct evangelization work, or desert and cease to be credible."

"He chose a difficult and unpopular path among bishops in Poland," one of "purification and truth," Przybysz said.

Given approximately 3.2% of priests incardinated into the diocese since its founding were involved in abusive behaviors — "statistically the diocese is somewhere in the middle, compared to global reports stating that between 2% and 6%" of priests abuse minors, Przybysz said, pointing out that every instance of clerical sexual abuse is "one too many."

Commission members said one of the problems they faced involved record-keeping and documentation.

Canon lawyer Aleksandra Brzemia-Bonarek described the scale of the archival investigation as titanic work because "the disorder in the paperwork was enormous," pointing out that the commission's independence from diocesan structures helped victims trust investigators.

Brzemia-Bonarek, who handled multiple cases for the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, told OSV News, "I have experience in criminal procedures in the Church, so I was not surprised by what I encountered, although I was surprised by the scale

of a certain inertia in handling cases."

Victims "were often treated with a sense of superiority. Reports were received with impatience, doubts were expressed about their testimony," Brzemia-Bonarek said, adding that survivors were warned that "accusations 'are serious and can destroy a priestly life.'"

She added that flawed evidence-gathering often discouraged victims from cooperating with Church investigators.

Commission chairman Tomasz Krzyzak, a Polish investigative journalist and canon lawyer, told OSV News that working with the Church archive was anything but easy, noting that investigating a relatively young diocese required a year of work, suggesting nationwide investigations could take several years.

Krzyzak credited Wazny with initiating trust-building efforts.

"He first established the commission, then met with survivors and visited parishes where harm occurred and finally, standing among those people, had the courage to say, 'I am sorry,'" Krzyzak said. "Changes essentially began when Bishop Wazny assumed ministry in the diocese," he added.

Przybysz told OSV News that after the challenge of commissioning an independent report, a diocese is set on the course of even a harder task — rebuilding trust — which requires cultural and structural changes across the Church.

"Listening is the first step to making survivors feel they are treated seriously," she said.

"Removing perpetrators from leadership roles is the second step," Przybysz continued. "The next steps are punishment, removing them from work with minors, and building awareness across the diocesan community that reporting abuse is a legal and moral obligation, not denunciation or 'destroying the Church.'"

She added that "in crisis communication theory, apologizing and admitting fault is not enough. Harmed persons want certainty that preventive actions will be implemented."

Brzemia-Bonarek admitted the diocese has already seen early signs of cultural change.

"We observed a greater culture of openness and shared responsibility between lay faithful and clergy in implementing prevention principles," she said.

For commission members, the report represents a beginning rather than a conclusion. "I hope that Sosnowiec and the commission established by Bishop Wazny will become a light in the tunnel," Przybysz said, "showing that we must follow the path of truth, explanation and repair, as far as it is possible."

On March 10-12 in Warsaw, Polish bishops will gather during their spring plenary assembly — exactly three years after they promised an independent commission on a national level will be established to investigate past cases of clerical sexual abuse in the country — a promise so far not fulfilled.

The Catholic Church in Poland is facing a historical low in the level of trust, with only one third of traditionally Catholic Poles trusting the Church.

In this context, journalist Tomasz Terlikowski wrote in Polish TVN24 website commenting on the local report in Poland's southern diocese: "I interpret what happened in the Diocese of Sosnowiec ... as a prophetic voice."

It's "a genuine breakthrough," he said, adding that if the bishops' conference doesn't follow, the Church in Poland will face "complete loss of credibility."