



Activists fighting child abuse stage a protest near the home of a former Catholic priest suspected of sexually assaulting dozens of children, in Etrechy, outside Paris, Wednesday, Sept 16, 2026, Placards read from the left: '330,000 victims of child sexual abuse, never again' and Delfosse, the church knew'. (AP/Thibault Camus)

Sylvie Corbet

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Pope Leo XIV, during his [four-day visit to France](#) beginning Friday, will meet privately with seven survivors of sexual abuse by priests and other Catholic personnel. The outcome will be closely watched by critics who say the church hasn't done enough to [confront the problem](#).

The meeting is scheduled for Sunday in Lourdes, one of Catholicism's most important pilgrimage sites. Some survivors' groups have criticized the decision to select individuals rather than representatives of established organizations.

The seven survivors said in a joint statement last week that they don't claim to represent all survivors.

"Engaging in dialogue does not mean endorsing," they said. "Being received does not mean abandoning our demands."

"Each of us is taking part in this meeting in our own name, free to express our own views, convictions and choices," the survivors said.

The French Bishops' Conference said that the group includes people who were abused as minors or adults in Catholic schools, parishes and religious congregations.

France's Catholic Church has begun to reckon with abuse

In recent years, the French Catholic Church has established an [independent compensation system](#) for survivors and acknowledged the institution's history of abuse.

[A 2021 report](#) estimated that 330,000 children in France had been sexually abused over seven decades by priests, other clergy members, church workers and volunteers.

One participant says he was abused at the private Catholic school [Notre-Dame de Bétharram](#) in southwestern France, where allegations span more than five decades.

Another was abused by Bernard Preynat, a priest who [acknowledged sexually abusing at least 75 boys](#) over several decades.

Preynat was sentenced in 2020 to [five years in prison](#) in one of France's most prominent clergy abuse cases to reach trial.

Another participant is among those who [have accused Abbé Pierre](#), a nationally revered priest and humanitarian who died in 2007, of sexually assaulting women.

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Survivors say the church still has a long way to go

Several survivors called on the Vatican to take further action against clergy sexual abuse as the Independent National Authority for Recognition and Reparation, or INIRR, said Tuesday that 1,969 people abused as children had come forward over the past five years. The independent body is handling a [wide-ranging reparations program](#) involving financial compensation.

"I'm satisfied that survivors' voices will be heard" by Leo, said Eric, 55, who was raped by a priest when he was between ages 8 and 14. "People are speaking out more freely, but there is still work to be done when it comes to listening to them."

"What I'd say to the Holy Father is: 'Keep learning and keep listening. You're on the right track, but you're not there yet,'" said Eric, who didn't want his last name to be public.

Cécile Reneaume, 34, who was abused as a young child by the leader of a Catholic community, who has since died, also received reparations through INIRR.

"There is still an enormous amount of work to be done ... We are only at the beginning," she said, suggesting reviewing "how sexuality is taught in seminaries" and taking care "not to ordain certain priests too quickly."

The Associated Press doesn't name victims of sexual assault or abuse unless they come forward publicly or give their consent to be identified.

Marie Derain de Vaucresson, the head of INIRR, called Sunday's meeting "a missed opportunity," saying she had hoped the message to the pope would be delivered in

"a more collective way."

"I think that in France, that collective voice already exists," she said. "I would also like him (Leo) to speak out strongly on this issue."

"Now the ball is in the institutions' court," she said.

Critics question the selection process

Charles Mercier, professor of history and sociology of Catholicism at the Paris-based École Pratique des Hautes Études, or EPHE, said that the main criticism concerns the group meeting with Leo "not being chosen by the victims but by the bishops and the institutions."

That has left some advocates who have fought for survivors' rights feeling they "are not recognized by the church," he said.

Following the 2021 reckoning over the extent of sexual abuse, "bishops begged for pardon to the victims. And now they give the impression that they want to turn the page," Mercier said.

Church leaders appear to be saying that "we have dealt with this crisis and now we are building the future," he said.

Alain Esquerre, a spokesperson for a group of Bétharram school survivors, said that words of compassion are "no longer enough" and called for a concrete plan to combat abuse.

"Receiving survivors' groups would carry far too much symbolic and political weight, and it would require concrete action to be taken," Esquerre said. "Because what we want is to move beyond simply hearing survivors' testimony and potentially providing them with financial compensation."

During a visit to Spain in June, [Leo met in Madrid with six survivors](#) of clergy sexual abuse and vowed to consider their suggestions for improving the church's response to the crisis, according to the Vatican.

In Lourdes, the facade of a basilica features mosaics by the Rev. Marko Rupnik that were recently covered entirely. Rupnik is on [trial in a Vatican court](#) on accusations of psychological, spiritual and sexual abuse involving more than two dozen women

dating back to the 1990s.

Activists demand broader action

Last week, child protection activists protested near the home of Jacques Delfosse, a former Catholic priest suspected of sexually assaulting dozens of children.

Protesters denounced what they described as authorities' failure to act against Delfosse, who served in northern France and the Paris region from 1964 until the 2000s.

Delfosse was convicted in 2007 of raping two girls younger than 15 during school holiday camps in the 1980s.

He was dismissed from the clerical state in 2025 after media reports prompted dozens to come forward with allegations. The Lille prosecutor's office opened an investigation in August into the new allegations.

Arnaud Gallais, 45, president of the child protection group Mouv'Enfants, called on President Emmanuel Macron to raise the case during his meeting with Leo on Friday. He also urged the Lille diocese and the Vatican to open their archives.

Denouncing an "unbearable" denial of justice, Gallais cited a report by the Independent Commission on Incest and Sexual Violence Against Children, or CIIVISE, stating that only 3% of rapes and sexual assaults committed against children each year in France result in a conviction.

This story appears in the **Pope Leo in France** feature series. [View the full series.](#)