

U.S. Catholic bishops face pressure amid new sex assault revelations



Washington, December 26 (RHC)-- U.S. bishops are preparing for a meeting to address the sexual abuse crisis that has shaken the Catholic Church and undermined its credibility following a new report accusing them of underplaying the abuse epidemic.

The growing sex abuse scandal is to be the main topic of discussion ahead of a summit in Rome convened for February by Pope Francis and organized with the help of Cardinal Blase Cupich, the head of Chicago's Catholic dioceses. U.S. bishops are also preparing to meet for a retreat in January at a seminary near Chicago, Illinois.

Mathew Schmalz, an expert on the Church and religious studies professor at the College of The Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, said the Church may never regain its lost credibility.

"Certainly, the bishops will face further pressure to follow through on transparency and reporting requirements," Schmalz told AFP. "But their credibility has been so weakened that they are also facing the possibility that any effort they make will have little to no credibility."

The increased public spotlight on the Church comes at a time when Church officials are facing ever more pressure from law enforcement to be more forthcoming.

The top prosecutors in around a dozen US states have opened criminal investigations. The Attorney General of the U.S. state of Illinois, Lisa Madigan, issued an explosive report last week, accusing the states Catholic dioceses of not releasing the names of at least 500 clergy accused of sexually abusing children.

The report revealed that 690 priests in the state have been accused of sexual abuse, while Catholic officials have publicly identified only 185. The results of the ongoing Illinois investigation, which began in August, are still preliminary and more revelations are expected.

The Illinois investigation was opened following the release of a probe by the attorney general of Pennsylvania that found over 300 Catholic priests in that state had sexually abused at least 1,000 children over a 70-year period, crimes that were systematically covered up by bishops.

Earlier this month, officials of the Jesuit order of the Catholic Church overseeing at least 40 U.S. states released the names of more than 240 members accused of abuse dating back to the 1950s.

"There's an unprecedented amount of public pressure and legal pressure on the Catholic Church," Anne Doyle, co-director of the abuse tracking site Bishop Accountability, told AFP.

Similar patterns of abuse have since emerged at dioceses around the globe, undermining the Church's moral authority and depleting its finances as it paid out billions of dollars in settlements.

In a letter released by the Vatican in August, Pope Francis condemned the U.S. Catholic Church's failure to bring to justice perpetrators of abuse.

The pontiff accepted the resignation of Alexander Salazar, the auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, California, over his "misconduct" with a minor.

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