

French clergy sexually abused over 200,000 children since 1950

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The Roman Catholic Church has been rocked by a series of sexual abuse scandals around the world, often involving children, over the past 20 years [File: Benoit Tessier/Reuters]

Paris, October 5 (RHC)-- About 216,000 children are estimated to have been sexually abused by French Catholic priests, deacons and other clergy since 1950, an independent inquiry has found, alleging the phenomenon was covered up for decades by a "veil of silence."

The details made public on Tuesday are the latest to rock the Roman Catholic Church after a series of sexual abuse scandals around the world, often involving children, over the past 20 years.

Jean-Marc Sauve, head of the commission that compiled the report on the investigation, said the abuse in France was "systemic" and had been carried out by some 3,000 priests and other people involved in the church. About 80 percent of the victims were boys.

Speaking at a public, online presentation of the report, Suave added that the Church had shown "deep, total and even cruel indifference for years," protecting itself rather than the victims.

The Church not only failed to take necessary preventive measures, he said, but also turned a blind eye to abuse and sometimes knowingly put children in touch with predators. "The consequences are very serious," Sauve said. "About 60 percent of men and women who were sexually abused encounter major problems in their sentimental or sexual life."

"You are a disgrace to our humanity," Francois Devaux, who set up victims' association La Parole Liberee, meaning The Liberated Word, told church representatives at the presentation.

"In this hell, there have been abominable mass crimes ... but there has been even worse, betrayal of trust, betrayal of morale, betrayal of children," Devaux said.

Christopher Lamb, Vatican correspondent for The Tablet, a publication focused on the Catholic Church, said the immediate fallout would see the Church shamed and survivors suffer "huge pain." "Only when the Church starts to face up to the truth of what happened in the past can there be some measure of healing," he told reporters. "What happened to unfortunately fuel this abuse crisis, and the mishandling of it, was the idea that authority was somehow unaccountable and therefore, there was an abuse of power going on. "That is what the Church must come to terms with and must reform."

The 2,500-page document prepared by the independent commission comes as the Catholic Church in France, like in other countries, faces up to shameful secrets that were long covered up. Speaking after Sauve at the presentation of the report, the archbishop of Reims and head of the Conference of Bishops of France, Eric de Moulins-Beaufort asked for forgiveness and promised to act.

The commission was established by Catholic bishops in France at the end of 2018 to shed light on abuse and restore public confidence in the Church at a time of dwindling congregations. It worked independently from the Church during its two-and-a-half-year lifetime, listening to victims and witnesses and studying church, court, police and press archives starting from the 1950s.

Sauve said the commission itself had identified approximately 2,700 victims through a call for testimony, and thousands more had been found in archives. But a wide-ranging study examining research and outcomes from polling groups estimated that there had been approximately 216,000 victims, a number which could rise to 330,000 when including abuse by lay members.

Sauve said 22 alleged crimes that can still be pursued have been forwarded to prosecutors. More than 40 cases that are thought to be too old to be prosecuted under French law, but involve alleged perpetrators who are still alive, have been forwarded to church officials.

The commission issued 45 recommendations about how to prevent abuse. These included training priests and other clerics, revising Canon Law – the legal code the Vatican uses to govern the church – and fostering policies to recognise and compensate victims, Sauve said.

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