

# Belgian bishops pledge measures to prevent further clergy sex abuse

BRUSSELS – Belgium's Catholic bishops said they would learn from their errors after an independent report highlighted hundreds of cases of sexual abuse by clergy.

The bishops said the church would work with Belgium's Justice and Interior ministries in devising ways of preventing abuse and bringing past cases to light. They said church officials would honor victims' demands to be personally involved in new "healing initiatives."

They pledged to set up a "center for recognition, healing and reconciliation," staffed by four experts who would work with church and state institutions and draw up plans for financial compensation. They also pledged to establish guidelines for all church personnel working with children and young people.

The initiatives were presented at a Sept. 13 news conference, three days after the report from a commission headed by Peter Adriaenssens recounted sexual abuse in most Catholic dioceses and all church-run boarding schools and religious orders.

The commission said 475 cases of abuse had been reported to it between January and June, including more than 300 cases that involved boys younger than 15 at the time the abuse occurred. Two-thirds of victims had been male, the report said, while 13 had killed themselves and six more attempted suicide.

The commission reported clergy assaulted more than 160 girls, many of whom had faced abuse into adulthood.

The problem was worst in the 1960s and declined in the 1980s, when there were fewer Catholic priests in Belgium and the church was less involved in education.

Although prosecutors had yet to bring charges against those accused, half of whom are now dead, the commission recommended punishing those who failed to come forward and setting up a solidarity fund for victims.

“These accounts and the suffering they contain make us shudder – they confront us with something which should never have happened and deserve our deepest and greatest attention for the human drama played out in them,” the bishops said in a statement.

“This series of upsetting events touches us grievously, like all those who, in one way or another, are active continuously or voluntarily in the church. A feeling of anger and powerlessness predominates among the faithful, notably among priests and pastoral workers. It is hard to find any way out of such a complex crisis,” the statement said.

“We wish to learn the necessary lessons from these past errors,” the church statement said. “We now need to find a new structure for cooperation between the different actors – the church and justice system, the justice system and social services, and between the victims on one side, and the church, justice system and social services on the other.”

The bishops said every account in the report was unique and merited “competent and specially tailored assistance.”

“Sexual abuse fundamentally undermines everything one can say about God, the Gospel or a Christian life,” the bishops said.

“The words evil, sin, confession, reparation, healing, asking and giving forgiveness form the core of the Christian language. These words are tragically, terribly polluted and deformed by the many accounts of sexual abuse. However regrettable the confrontation may be, these accounts and the faces of their victims cannot be hidden from our community,” they said.