

Child sexual abuse by Catholic clergy in Europe. A review of official reports and takeaways for state authorities

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Abstract

The spread of child sexual abuse around the globe is one of the most devastating problems in contemporary world. The scope of the issue is not only severe in its deep and long-lasting effects on children and their families, but also in many cases it remains hidden: it is one of the least reported crimes in society. The fact that quite often it is out the radar of authorities makes the plague more evasive to understand and difficult to fight. So far, no European government has conducted a scientific investigation on the scope of sexual abuse as the basic tool to tackle the issue and its most frequent causes. The only institutions that have commissioned such reports are three Catholic episcopal conferences in the continent. Its findings are summarised in this article, to infer takeaways useful for state authorities to confront and defeat the mentioned problem.

Keywords: child sexual abuse, crisis, European Union, Catholic Church, protection of minors

Wykorzystywanie seksualne dzieci przez duchownych katolickich w Europie. Przegląd oficjalnych raportów i wniosków dla władz państwowych

Streszczenie

Rozprzestrzenianie się wykorzystywania seksualnego dzieci na całym świecie jest jednym z najbardziej niszczycielskich problemów współczesnego świata. Skala problemu jest nie tylko dotkliwa ze względu na głębokie i długotrwałe skutki dla dzieci i ich rodzin, ale w wielu przypadkach pozostaje on ukryty: jest to jedno z najrzadziej zgłaszanych przestępstw w społeczeństwie. Fakt, że plaga często pozostaje poza radarem władz, sprawia, że jej zrozumienie i zwalczanie jest trudniejsze. Jak dotąd żaden rząd europejski nie przeprowadził badań naukowych nad skalą wykorzystywania sek-

sualnego jako podstawowego narzędzia walki z tym problemem i jego najczęstszymi przyczynami. Jedynymi instytucjami, które zleciły takie raporty, są trzy katolickie konferencje episkopalne na kontynencie. W niniejszym artykule podsumowano ich ustalenia, aby wyciągnąć wnioski przydatne dla władz państwowych w walce z omawianym problemem.

Słowa kluczowe: wykorzystywanie seksualne dzieci, kryzys, Unia Europejska, Kościół katolicki, ochrona nieletnich

Child sexual abuse is a global plague affecting children and adults. According to available statistics based on projections from still scarce scientific research, two main traits characterise the issue: the scope of abuse is similar throughout the world, and it happens mainly in families, schools and universities, sport clubs, hospitals, religious and state institutions.

European institutions, throughout the years, worked out prevention procedures and legal frameworks to protect children. What European governments have not done is to commission scientific investigations to understand and tackle the plague. Instead, some episcopates of the Catholic Church in the European Union – either urged by the sincere need to understand and prevent new cases, or for external pressure due to scandals unveiled by the media, or for both reasons – have commissioned independent reports on the matter, published its findings and used them as a solid base for prevention plans.

Considering that 39,58% of the EU population is Catholic (Agenzia Fides 2024), it seems reasonable to study those reports and their recommendations, in the hope that those findings would help to understand the problem beyond the Catholic realm.

Materials and methods

First, the author will introduce the topic with the definitions of sexual abuse, the reasons for its late discovery and of low rates of disclosure. Furtherly, the author will provide a brief overview of European legislation on child protection. Finally, the scope and scale of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in given European countries will be given through the prism of national reports published by bishops' conferences.

Main sources of the paper are government and church reports, European legislation, as well as academic expertise and papers published in the field.

Definitions

The United Nations defines sexual abuse along with sexual exploitation as "An actual or attempted abuse of someone's position of vulnerability (such as a person depending on you for survival, food rations, school, books, transport, or other services), differential power or trust, to obtain sexual favors, including but not only, by offering money or other social, economic, or political advantages. It includes trafficking and prostitution" (UNHCR 2025).

According to the World Health Organization, child sexual abuse is "involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to" (WHO 2017). The minor's participation in the act could take different forms: "forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. The activities may involve physical contact, including abuse by penetration or non-penetrative acts [...]. They may also include non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of, sexual online images, watching sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways" (Independent Inquiry... 2018: p. 18).

Child sexual abuse (CSA) includes two elements: first, the perpetrator must be a superior in some way, whether due to a relation of providing care (parents), blood relationship (siblings), a power imbalance (teachers and sports trainers), or moral authority (religious leaders); second, the victim is a minor according to the law of the land (Sajkowska 2018: p. 170).

Description of the problem

One of the difficulties to tackle CSA is related to its late discovery. Today the negative effects of child sexual abuse on a person's psychological well-being and their development into adulthood is medically proven and undeniable (Noll 2021). CSA is associated with – among other health-oriented factors – poor physical health and eating disorders (Beitchman, Zucker et al. 1991 and 1992), poor sexual and reproductive health such as unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and gynecological disorders, including menstrual irregularities (Maniglio 2009), and poor mental health due to post-traumatic stress, anxiety, depression, suicide, and self-harm (Paolucci, Genuis, Violato 2001; Romano, De Luca 2001).

However, the first report on the dramatic consequences of sexual abuse on children was not published until 1977, by the American pediatrician Dr. Henry Kempe (Krugman, Korbin 2013). Another pioneer in studying CSA was American sociologist David Finkelhor. In the late 1970s, the only epidemiological studies on CSA focused on the issue mostly from the point of view of its effects on adults' marital life, since adults who were victims of sexual abuse in their childhood experienced more depression, anxiety, and other psychiatric symptoms than those who did not (Bagley et al. 1994); and had higher rates of drug and alcohol abuse (Finkelhor 1984, 1986).

The first country, where this awareness began, was the United States, which was also the first in establishing social policies and centers to raise awareness of the problem: for example, the National Center of Child Abuse and Neglect was established and promoted the Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) in 1974 (see: NCCAN WWW).

A key moment in which awareness regarding CSA expanded outside United States was the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the rise of child protection policies that came afterwards (Núñez 2021). In addition, the growing victims' rights discourse also "contributed toward CSA's prioritization in the social and political agendas of the time" (Fassin, Rechtman 2009). This growing social awareness slowly generated

a reporting and prevention system in countries like the United States, in which a mandatory reporting law was established. Consequently, "the reporting of cases skyrocketed: in that country, the number of reported cases raised a 300% between 1980 and 1986" (Sajkowska 2018: p. 201).

In Western European countries, awareness grew at a slightly slower rate. In the Eastern bloc under Soviet dominion, it took even longer. Human rights issues like child protection did not really emerge there until after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. This late social awareness meant that even doctors were not trained to understand what abuse could mean for people – in their childhood or in their lives as adults.

The second obstacle to fully understand the scope of the problem is related to the fact that rigorous statistics and scientific research on the scope of CSA are scarce. At the bottom of this lack of information lie two factors. The first one regards the facts: only a small percentage of victims disclose CSA, and even adults who know about the abuse are reluctant to admit it (Hébert et al. 2009; Jonzon, Lindblad 2004). Studies show that most male CSA victims will not disclose their CSA until more than 10 years have passed. For women, the average period between the CSA experiences and disclosure is much shorter (O'Leary 2007). Several surveys have shown that many survivors delay telling anyone about the abuse incident (Hershkowitz, Lanes, Lamb 2007).

The second is conceptual: CSA is a multi-faceted problem due to disagreements about what age is to be considered a minor, whether a minimum age gap between the abuser and the victim has to exist, and which kinds of actions CSA includes. Many studies show that many more children are sexually abused than ever come to any official agencies' attention (Karsna, Kelly 2021).

European legislation protecting children

Child protection has become a central theme in European legal and policy frameworks. Over the last two decades, both the European Union (EU) and the Council of Europe (CoE) have adopted binding legal instruments, soft-law recommendations and monitoring mechanisms to prevent and combat abuse, exploitation and neglect. Together, they constitute a comprehensive framework emphasising prevention, victim support, professional training and monitoring.

The most important norms in EU legislation are the following:

- 1) Victims' Rights Directive: Established under the themes "I will keep my eyes open," Directive 2012/29/EU set "minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime." It refers to children as particularly vulnerable victims and requires access to information, support services, individual risk assessments and protection during criminal proceedings. National governments must ensure that child victims have access to specialist support services tailored to their needs.
- 2) Directive 2024/1385/EU, the first EU-wide "criminal law" instrument on "violence against women and domestic violence." Although primarily gender-focused, the directive significantly enhances child protection by criminalising "harmful

practices" such as "forced marriage," "female genital mutilation" and online forms of abuse.

- 3) Directive on Combating Sexual Abuse of Children: Directive 2011/93/EU obliges Member States to criminalise child "sexual abuse and exploitation," including online child sexual abuse material. It introduces prevention obligations: screening and training for professionals working with children, awareness-raising programmes, and specialised support.
- 4) Anti-Trafficking Directive (Directive 2024/1712/EU) or "Directive on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims," strengthens the focus on child victims. It mandates demand-reduction measures, victim identification, and online crime prevention. National action plans are compulsory, and children are recognised as particularly vulnerable victims requiring specialised protection.
- 5) Cross-Border Protection: Children often migrate within Europe, making cross-border protection essential. The Protection Order Directive (Directive 2011/99/EU) and Regulation 606/2013 ensure that protective measures, such as restraining orders, are recognised across Member States, thus preventing secondary victimisation and ongoing abuse.
- 6) Child Protection Systems Recommendation: The Recommendation 2024/1238/EU emphasises integrated child-protection systems. It outlines operational measures: early detection, multidisciplinary teams, national referral mechanisms, data systems and child-friendly procedures. Though non-binding, it provides detailed guidance for implementing the binding directives (see: Commission Recommendation (EU) 2024/1238).

On the other side, Council of Europe's Treaties and legislation on the issue are the following:

- 1) The Istanbul Convention (2011) is the most comprehensive treaty on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. For children, it requires preventive education, training of professionals, specialist services and coordinated policy frameworks (Council of Europe 2011).
- 2) The Lanzarote Convention (2007), whose full title is Council of Europe "Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse," addresses the protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. It mandates criminalisation of all forms of abuse, preventive screening, awareness-raising, safe reporting and child-friendly justice (Council of Europe 2007).
- 3) Policy Guidelines on Integrated Strategies: Recommendation CM/Rec (2009) and subsequent policy guidelines advise states on building integrated national child protection strategies (Council of Europe 2009).

Although developed within different legal frameworks, EU and CoE instruments converge on several preventive priorities. However, despite robust legal frameworks, implementation remains uneven. The European Protection Order is underused due to

administrative complexity. In addition, online abuse poses a moving target for legislators. We could conclude that to ensure that legal obligations translate into concrete protection for children requires the political will to decide a scientific study on the prevalence of child sexual abuse in Europe, and to provide resources to do so.

The case of the Catholic Church in Europe

CSA in the Church has been defined as "the sexual assault, sexual exploitation, or sexual grooming of a child under age 18 by clergy, candidates for clergy, other employed pastoral staff, and volunteers helping out in Church-run programs" (Parkinson et al. 2012: p. 555).

The beginning of the third millennium of her history has been a turbulent time for the Catholic Church. Archbishop Georg Gänswein, personal secretary of Pope Benedict XVI from 2004 to 2022, described the scandal of the sexual abuse of minors by priests as the "September 11 of the Catholic Church" (2015, qtd. in Ivereigh et al. 2019: p. 327): the moment in which her vulnerability was visible to everyone.

Even if the crisis started in the United States, it is having universal scope. It has shaken the entire Church, both geographically (from Canada to Australia, from Chile to Poland) and institutionally (schools, seminaries, parishes, convents, youth centers, diocesan curias, shrines, NGOs). It has caused harm to thousands of victims, but also to Catholics who were not directly harmed, whose faith and confidence in their pastors and Catholic institutions was shaken by the evil of what happened.

To understand this better, we can distinguish four phases in the scandal: First, the discovery that the abuses were not isolated cases, but instead affected numerous priests everywhere. Second, an intense media reporting, which unveiled the fact that many Catholic authorities, instead of taking the right decisions, preferred to cover up and protect not the victims, but their reputation. Third, a slow process of conversion at the Vatican, changing norms and protocols, and establishing strong prevention measures to protect children in ecclesial environments. Finally, its implementation by the local episcopates.

In order to do so based on facts and not just perceptions, some European episcopal conferences decided that they would not be blindly driving their reform measures and their compensation plans without a clear understanding of the prevalence of abuse in their ranks, and therefore – following the example of the U.S. episcopal conference, which in 2003 entrusted a report to the "John Jay College of Criminal Justice" (JJC 2004) – commissioned independent reports to find out the facts. Let's study those reports and their findings.

To date, rigorous analyses of the extent of the abuse of minors in Catholic settings, conducted according to a scientific or forensic methodology, have been of two types: those undertaken at the initiative of state authorities and those commissioned by Church authorities.

In the first category are the Royal Commission report commissioned by Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard in January 2013 and published in 2017, which covered the

abuses committed between 1950 and 2015; the reports produced by two Irish parliamentary committees: the 2009 Murphy report (Murphy et. al. 2009) and the 2010 Cloyne report (Murphy et. al. 2010); and the investigations of the Public Prosecutor's Office ("Grand Jury Report") of the U.S. State of Pennsylvania (PGJR 2018). The first one covered all cases of CSA in any institution, civil or religious, while the latter three focused only on abuses in the ecclesial sphere. These reports, entrusted to independent researchers, provided dependable data, thanks the collaboration of bishops and religious communities, which – in many cases – granted access to the archives, and presented in a systematic way.

In Europe, five episcopates have commissioned similar reports: a report in Germany, focused on the 1946-2014 period; the so-called Sauvé Report in France, which covered cases from 1950 to 2020; a report in Switzerland in 2022; a report in Portugal, which investigated cases that occurred between 1950 and 2022; and finally, a report in Spain, covering the period 1939-2023.

Each report responded to different circumstances and needs, aimed at different objectives, and followed different scientific methodologies. What they have in common is that their findings provide data and insights about the prevalence of CSA inside the Catholic Church unlike any civil or religious organisation. This has enabled the Church to act on the findings to create a safe environment for children and vulnerable adults.

The MHG Report (Germany, 2018)

In 2014, the German bishops entrusted a group of independent researchers from the Universities of Mannheim, Heidelberg and Giessen with an exhaustive study of the diocesan archives from 1946 until that date, to understand the scale of clerical abuse and how it could have been systematically concealed for decades. It is not clear why it took 12 years for the German bishops to decide on an extension of this study. During the development of prevention measures in the U.S., the German bishops' conference had stated that, "The German Church does not have to put themselves in the shoes of the Americans" (Schwarz, Wensierski 2002). According to Dressing et al. (2021), the Catholic Church in Germany "took no steps toward the prevention of sexual abuse until 2010, and even then, there was no unity in response across its 27 dioceses."

The report published in 2018 is normally called the MHG study (MHG Study Research Project 2018), for the initials of universities previously mentioned. It was the first comprehensive study to examine the extent of CSA by the Catholic clergy in any country in the European Union. The study aimed to "determine the frequency of the sexual abuse of minors by diocesan priests and deacons, as well as by priests within religious orders" who are governed by »Gestellungsverträge« (a contract conferring a form of stipend), within the sphere for which the German Bishops' Conference is responsible, as well as to describe the forms of sexual abuse and to identify structures and dynamics within the Church which might favor abuse" (MHG Study Research Project 2018: p. 2).

The study covered all 27 German dioceses (although some of them did not cooperate). Investigators reviewed "the personnel files of 38 156 Catholic priests" (MHG

Study Research Project 2018: p. 4) deacons, and male members of religious orders during the period of 1946 to 2014. The data of the MHG study came from six sources: (1) clergy personnel records, screened by diocesan staff (for the sake of confidentiality and data protection, the study team did not have direct access to the records); (2) questionnaires from identified perpetrators; (3) generic information about the victims ("socio-demographic" data, the type of abuse, the "circumstances," and the "consequences" of the abuse); (4) data gathered on the number of relocations from parish to parish or other institutional place of activity of accused and non-accused clerics; and (5) questionnaire on dioceses' organisation and their priest training and prevention programmes; and (6) "All information on identified cases of sexual abuse was transferred (in anonymised form) to questionnaires that were provided by the research project and sent to the research consortium for analysis." (MHG Study Research Project 2018: p. 2).

The findings were the following:

- 3 677 children (62.8% males), most of them 13 years old or younger, were sexually abused by members of the Catholic clergy over the past seven decades. "This averaged out to 2.5 persons affected per accused person (SP6). The figure reported in the analysis of criminal records was 3.9" (MHG Study Research Project 2018: p. 4).
- Allegations of sexual abuse of minors against 1 670 clerics, equivalent of 4.4% of all clerics from 1946 to 2014 whose personnel records and other documents were reviewed. "The share among diocesan priests was 5.1% (1,429 accused persons). It was 2.1 percent (159 accused persons) among priests within religious orders who are governed by »Gestellungsverträge« (a contract conferring a form of stipend), and 1.0 percent (24 accused persons) among full-time deacons. The clerical status of 58 accused persons was unknown" (MHG Study Research Project 2018: p. 4).
- Typically, the abusers prayed on children after 14.3 years in ministry on average. "The mean age of the accused persons when committing their first offence was 42.6" (MHG Study Research Project 2018: p. 5).
- 54.0% clerics were accused of abusing a single child or adolescent, whereas 42.3% were accused of abusing two or more. "The corresponding figure was missing for 3.7 percent of them. Accused persons with multiple allegations accounted for an average of 4.7 persons affected. The maximum value was 44 persons affected for one accused person" (MHG Study Research Project 2018: p. 4).
- "Information existed regarding at least two persons affected aged 13 or younger in the case of 28.2 percent of accused persons," said the report, indicating to a number of priests that were pedophiles (MHG Study Research Project 2018: p. 5).
- Other personal problems were reported such as a constant feeling of being overloaded with "official duties", "signs of psychological problems" or "substance abuse" (MHG Study Research Project 2018: p. 5).
- The victim gender profile was the following: 62.8% male, 34.9% female, 2.3% were missing gender information (MHG Study Research Project 2018: p. 4).

- "The mean age of persons affected whose age was known was 12.0 years." (MHG Study Research Project 2018: p. 5).

The rate of accused clerics found in the German study is remarkably similar to that of the John Jay report in the U.S. The study also found many parallels in the characteristics of perpetrator priests: average age, moment in their ministry, and others. The German study also shows that more male than female victims (62% in Germany, 81.3% in the U.S.), mean age (12 years vs 11–14).

The Sauv  Report (France, 2023)

In France, the media started covering sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in the 1980s. At the time, the Church reported some of the cases, but institutional responsibility has not been claimed and as in many parts of the world at the time – they were treated as exceptional and rare. (B raud 2003).

Media pressure increased at the beginning of the 2000s, following the international coverage of the scandal in the U.S. and bolstered locally by the creation of associations for victims, such as "La Parole Lib r e." "In 2019, the French Senate asked for a mission of information on the prevention of paedo-criminality in institutions for children. The Catholic Church itself has taken up the issue by setting up its own independent commission of enquiry in 2019: The Commission Ind pendante sur les Abus Sexuels dans l'Eglise (CIASE)." (Bajos et al. 2023: p. 5454) At that time, only two countries (the Netherlands and Germany) "have conducted population-based surveys to estimate the prevalence of Church-related CSA in the general population" (Bajos et al. 2023: p. 5454).¹

In France, national hotlines and online platforms serve to centralise information on reported cases and coordinate responses involving healthcare, legal advice, and law enforcement, Bajos et al. point out in their research. "However, this reporting system fails to identify most cases of CSA, based on scarce population-based survey estimates" (Bajos et al. 2023: p. 5454; Hamel et al. 2016). Therefore, the CIASE decided to follow the approach of the Netherlands and Germany "by conducting a population-based survey to estimate the Roman Catholic Church-related CSA prevalence" (Bajos et al. 2023: p. 5454).

Even if Nathalie Bajos was a leading sociologist behind the study, Jean-Marc Sauve was president of the commission – hence the popular name of the CIASE report – a Sauve report (Sauv  2021: p. 31). However, in this study I will use Bajos' publication as a major point of academic reference since the paper published in 2023 is the most comprehensive one on the CIASE study.

Bajos et al. (2023) aimed to estimate the prevalence and describe the characteristics of CSA in the Catholic Church in France by comparing reported CSA cases involving members of the Church "to the number of people who attended a Roman Catholic-

¹ As a point of reference, the Dutch survey found that 1.7% of Dutch people over 40 years old claimed to have been sexually abused during childhood by a member of the Catholic Church (Langeland et al. 2015). The German survey found a prevalence of 0.21% of CSA by a priest or pastor and 0.16% within the context of a Roman Catholic institution (Witt et al. 2019).

related activities during childhood. We contrast Roman Catholic Church-related CSA prevalence and characteristics with CSA occurring in other social spheres, in particular the family and schools" (Bajos et al. 2023: p. 5455).

This study drew "from a web-panel cross-sectional survey including 243,601 respondents who completed a questionnaire between November 2020 and January 2021. Quotas were used to draw a representative sample of the French population based on age, sex, and region." (Bajos et al. 2023: p. 5455). The sociodemographic characteristics were asked, such as "age, sex, level of education, and father's occupation when they were 15 years old." (Bajos et al. 2023: p. 5455).

Six locations were identified as places of potential violence against children by previous research done by United Nations: next to "family," and "school," also Catholic-based, "summer camps," and "sport clubs," as well as "artistic/cultural activities" were listed (Pinheiro 2006).

These are the main results of the French study on CSA:

- Social context: The family home was the most common scene of the abuse, with an estimated prevalence of 3.55% (5.50% for women and 1.40% for men); "Catholic Church-related CSA was the second most common social sphere of perpetration with an estimated prevalence of 0.81%" (Bajos et al. 2023: p. 5459) indicating to specific numbers: 0.34% among women and 1.28% among men; 0.32% was prevalence reported in public schools; 0.34% at summer camps; 0.26% in sports clubs; 0.13% who participated in artistic/cultural activities.
- CSA was overwhelmingly perpetrated by men rather than women, regardless of the social sphere: 93.37% male perpetrators in the Church; 95.00% in the family; and 97.65% in schools (Bajos et al. 2023: p. 5462).
- "One in three (34.51%) first cases of abuse occurred at the time of puberty (between 10 and 13 years old) regardless of social spheres of perpetrators, but this was more common in the case of Catholic Church-related CSA (55.93%), than family-related CSA (35.16%) or school-related CSA (32.94%)" (Bajos et al. 2023: p. 5462).
- 14.60% of women and 6.38% of men reported an experience of CSA.
- Victims of CSA were from all social backgrounds. The only exception was that higher rates of CSA within the family occurred among respondents whose fathers were unemployed.
- Relevantly a high number of victims previously spoke about their abuse, including 41.81% of those abuse within the Catholic spectrum; 41.25% of school victims; and 51.68% of family victims of abuse.
- Regarding the Church specifically, the study estimated that 213,000 "individuals were sexually abused by a member of the Catholic clergy before the age of 18 in France since 1950" (Bajos et al. 2023: p. 5461). Having suffered clerical abuse was more common among men than women (1.28% vs. 0.34%) while the opposite was true for other social spheres.
- This means, projecting from the sample outward: "If we assume that 3–5% of Catholic clergy members were perpetrators, our projections would suggest

that each priest would have abused an average of 34 to 57 children" (Bajos et al. 2023: p. 5461).

- Catholic Church-related CSA victims were also "more likely to have experienced abuse in other social spheres (53.1%) compared to those who experienced CSA in the family (23.4%) or at school (22.8%)" (Bajos et al. 2023: p. 5462).

Those percentages are markedly different from those gathered in previous studies conducted in other countries. It is unclear whether the cause of such a gap is due to the profile of CSA in France or to the methodology used in that study.

Swiss "Pilot research project" (2023)

Swiss episcopate has done things in a different order than its neighbors. While in France the recommendations of the investigative commission (CIASE) led to the creation of compensation bodies, the Swiss Commission for Listening, Conciliation, Arbitration and Reparation (CECAR) was created in 2016, before any investigation into the prevalence of CSA in Church environments (Méténier 2023).

Also, victims had – since 1997 – so-called "Lavi centers", where specially trained psychologists, paid by the state, receive victims of any physical, psychological or sexual abuse, offer to pay for a certain number of hours of legal representation, and accompany victims to court hearings so that they can assert their rights and seek legal redress (Méténier 2023). In addition, those centers ensure financial compensation (partial or full) to victims for the physical and moral harm, when their abusers are insolvent.

Right after the publication of the CIASE report on Sexual Abuse in the Church in France, officials of the Swiss bishops contacted two historians at the University of Zurich (UZH), Monika Dommann and Marietta Meier, and requested an accumulative report on the prevalence of sexual abuse in Catholic environments in Switzerland, from 1950 to the present day.

On 6 December 2021, the Swiss Bishops' Conference, the Conference of Unions of Religious Orders and Consecrated Life Communities in Switzerland, and the Roman Catholic Central Conference (which groups together the cantonal organisations), commissioned a one-year "pilot project" of historical nature, and funded it with 1 million francs. "The investigative team was overseen by a board of six scientists appointed by the Swiss Historical Society to guarantee the independent nature of the project and advise researchers who may have questions about access to archives, for example, or about Church procedures" (Méténier 2023).

Informing about the decision, the episcopal conference stated that "a scientific research on these cases is a duty we owe above all to the victims, also to draw a lesson the future" (Zengarini 2021). The nature of the report was historical, not legal: its authors explained, "we are not judges" and will not "assess guilt in the legal sense, nor will [they] make recommendations that go beyond [their] area of expertise, such as the prevention of sexual abuse" (Smith 2024). The historians were also assured freedom of research of any Catholic documents kept in the diocesan archives, and access to the Vatican Apos-

tolic Archives (previously known as Vatican Secret Archives). In addition, they conducted interviews with victims, experts and Church representatives.

After one year of work (from spring 2022 to spring 2023), on September 12, 2023, the investigative team published the 135-page document entitled *Report on the Pilot Project for the History of Sexual Abuse in the Context of the Roman Catholic Church in Switzerland since the Mid-20th Century*. UZH team drew up a provisional inventory of 1,002 cases of sexual abuse alongside signs of a systematic cover-up, and they identified accusations against 510 Catholic clerics, church staff and members of Catholic orders (Hehli, Tribelhorn 2023).

The report concludes: "We found a lot of evidence that church leaders systematically covered up cases of abuse". It is not uncommon for people who have experienced abuse in a secular setting to frequently remain silent out of shame or provide incomplete information. However, for cases in a Catholic context, "Often, victims of sexual abuse were defamed both by church employees and in their social environment and had to endure accusations of complicity, or what happened to them completely remained a taboo subject," the authors write (Hehli, Tribelhorn 2023). According to them, the reports show how silence was encouraged and demanded, and what mechanisms prevented victims from trying to make their voices heard, and it is connected to abuse of power: "Although power does not automatically lead to abuse, abuse without power is unthinkable" (Hehli, Tribelhorn 2023).

Even if the pilot project was unable to quantify the exact number of abuse cases within the Catholic Church in Switzerland, its main findings show similar figures than the reports published previously in other countries in previous years. These are the most relevant ones:

- 921 abused persons were identified: 56% were male, 39% were female, and in 5% of the cases it was not possible to identify the gender based on the documents available.
- Cases are divided in three contexts: diocesan pastoral care, Catholic educational institutions, and religious orders. More than half of the abuse cases took place in the first context, nearly a third involved church-run homes, schools and boarding schools. Only about two dozen assaults are documented in religious orders, but – as I have mentioned – congregations were reluctant to cooperate with the study, and when they did, their archives were full of large gaps.
- Almost all the 510 accused were men: 149 were accused for at least two people, while the remaining 361 were accused for one person,
- 74% of cases involved sexual abuse committed against children of different age groups: infants and prepubescent children, postpubescent young adults, and 14% against adults.
- Most reported cases of abuse happened between 1950 and 1969.
- There is no significative difference between dioceses, in which the laity exercised ecclesiastical leadership (something quite common in Switzerland since the 1970s) and those, in which that tendency was more limited.

In a joint statement, representatives of the Church in Switzerland commented on the results of the pilot study, saying that they were not only "human errors", but "grossly negligent to irresponsible actions" and the "failure of church institutions" (Hehli, Tribelhorn 2023). Those authorities announced preventive measures such as an independent nationwide contact point for victims of abuse, the current reporting system is to be professionalised, and the introduction of a psychological assessment for future priests, permanent deacons and members of religious congregations (Keaten 2023). In addition, the Bishops' Conference announced its "intention to create an ecclesiastical criminal and disciplinary tribunal for the Church in Switzerland, which would require authorization from the Holy See" (Méténier 2023).

As explained, the report was not intended as a "definitive analysis, but [...] an initial outline of possible areas and projects for further investigation," but it lay the foundation "for a second and comprehensive research on the history of sexual abuse committed by Catholic clergy, Church employees and members of religious orders in Switzerland since the mid-20th century, not only of historical nature but including other perspectives: sociological, legal and theological" (Zollner 2023). This second report – to which the Swiss Catholics institutions contributed with another 1.5 million francs – started in 2024 and will take two years to be completed (Méténier 2023).

The release of the Swiss pilot study was followed by several reports of sexual abuse in different dioceses. For instance, between September 2023 and 20 January 2024, the diocese of Basel – the largest in the country, with over a million Catholics – received 141 reports of sexual abuse. Of these, 96% were claims made against people who are now dead, cases of sexual abuse, for which the statute of limitations had expired, and reports where the accused and the presumed victims could not be identified. Five criminal complaints lodged are currently being processed by the competent authorities. Other lawsuits proceed in other dioceses.

The report *Giving silence a voice* (Portugal, 2023)

In October 2021, following Pope Francis' general indication to all episcopates after the 2019 Meeting, the Episcopal Conference of Portugal (port. *Conferencia Episcopal Portuguesa*, CEP) created commissions to investigate and prevent sexual abuse within the Church in each of the country's 21 dioceses, made up of lay members who were experts in law, psychiatry and psychology. Weeks later, the plenary assembly of the Portuguese episcopate was scheduled. The bishops arrived divided on whether they should retroactively investigate cases of abuse as in France or Germany, or do nothing (EFE 2021).

On the eve of that meeting, an open letter signed by more than two hundred Catholic intellectuals called on the CEP to conduct a "rigorous, comprehensive and truly independent" investigation into sexual abuse, because the measures adopted so far were "totally insufficient. [...] We guess that the bishops' response to the question regarding the existence of victims in the context of the Portuguese Church is: 'there are almost no reported cases.' This cannot seriously be considered as an argu-

ment because today we all are aware that those abuses have been observed in the Catholic Church in all latitudes and cultural environments, are systemic and related to the exercise of power within it and, on another level, with passive or active cover-up maneuvers". The signers asked the bishops that they align "themselves with the orientations of Pope Francis," and that the commission in charge of the investigation be formed "exclusively by lay people, Catholics and non-believers, who are professionals in the social sciences and justice, whose autonomy and independence are absolutely unquestionable, even if it may eventually be advised by some element of the clergy." The letter also stated that, if this initiative is not taken immediately, "the investigation will end up taking place by political decision, which will certainly mean an increase in reputational costs for the Church, yet another sadness that we all firmly want to avoid" (Agência Lusa 2021).

On November 10, 2021, the CEP accepted this request and announced the creation of a national commission to investigate the history of the sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable adults committed within the Church in Portugal. "We are not afraid; on the contrary, we want to know the full truth," CEP President José Ornelas told the press (EFE 2021).

Ornelas announced that the commission would conduct the study with "total independence," because the bishops want to get "to the bottom of the issues": "We do not want in any way to condition the work of this commission" (EFE 2021).

This commission started its work on 11 January 2022. Its plan of action was publicly presented and focused on collecting testimonies through a telephone line, a website and an email address – guaranteeing anonymity – but also gathering cases reported in the press and by social and medical institutions. Diocesan archives would also be consulted, for which collaboration was requested. The stated objective was, "to clarify as best as possible everything that may have happened in Portugal – a country in which 80% of the population declares itself Catholic – in the last seven decades." The experts of the commission admitted that achieving this objective would be "very difficult."

Therefore, CEP ruled out carrying out an exhaustive investigation (which would have required much more time and material and human resources) choosing instead to study the documentation available in the diocesan archives and listen to the victims who wanted to communicate with them. Some survivors did this in person; others preferred to contact the experts only through the online form, either anonymously or leaving their contact information.

Child psychiatrist Pedro Strecht led the commission. It took one year to complete, and they published a study entitled *Dar voz ao silêncio* ["Giving silence a voice"] (Strecht et al. 2023). The report was completed on time and delivered in February 2023, first to the president of the Portuguese bishops' conference, Bishop José Ornelas of Leiria-Fátima, and the next day presented to the media.

The report *Giving silence a voice* (Conferencia Episcopal Portuguesa 2023) provided a comprehensive overview of the sexual abuse cases involving Catholic clergy in Portugal. Below is a summary of key data:

- The report documented a total of 512 cases of sexual abuse committed by clergy members in Portugal. These cases spanned several decades, with a substantial number occurring between the 1960s and the 1990s, as seen around the world.
- The cases of abuse were distributed through time in this way: 1960s: 63 cases; 1970s: 115 cases; 1980s: 138 cases; 1990s: 132 cases; 2000s: 45 cases; 2010s: 19 cases.
- Regarding age, most victims were between the ages of 10 and 14 at the time of the abuse (68%). Another 22% were aged 15 to 17, and 10% were under the age of 10.
- A significant majority of the victims were male, comprising 76% of the reported cases. Female victims accounted for 24%.
- The majority of abusers were parish priests, accounting for 72% of the cases. Other perpetrators included members of religious orders (18%) and high-ranking clergy such as bishops and cardinals (10%). Most of the perpetrators were between the ages of 30 and 50 at the time of the abuse: 45% were in their 30s, 35% were in their 40s, and 20% were over the age of 50.

Comparing this data with the information provided by other reports, the scale and violence of clergy sexual abuse in Portugal was similar to that of other European countries. The main differences were two. First, in Portugal, abuse began at a younger age, just 11 years old on average. According to experts, this could be due to the specific place that seminaries had in the Portuguese education system in the second half of the twentieth century. Many dioceses had minor seminaries acting as ordinary high schools, in which many students were not studying to become priests.

Second, even if the abused minors in Portugal were for the most part boys, the proportion of girls who had been abused was higher in Portugal than in the U.S., France, and Germany.

The report *To Give Light* (Spain, 2023)

The report *To Give Light*, published by the Spanish bishops' conference in December 2023 (Conferencia Episcopal Española 2023), addresses the problem of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in Spain from a different perspective. In the first place, it is "a living report, which has the vocation of continuing to incorporate all the relevant data on this issue to offer this information to the members of the Church and to society" (n. 1). The year 1940 was a starting point, but it has been adding cases as the Church in Spain became aware of them. This second version includes cases up to the end of 2022, but the CEE announced plans to publish an updated report early in 2025.

"To Give Light" is an extensive work, 7 volumes long, and it is divided into five chapters. The first is dedicated to sexual abuse within society from the historical, legal and public perspectives. The second includes the doctrinal and operational position of the Church in the face of abuse: prevention protocols, codes of good practice, and training programmes. The third constitutes the core of the report and offers a complete overview

of the allegations of sexual abuse kept in the Church's archives, with a study of each and its circumstances.

In the fourth chapter, the report explains the canonical norms in force on abuse in the universal Church and in Spain, and the actions of the different Spanish dioceses. Finally, the fifth chapter collects a selection of the observations and recommendations made to the Catholic Church by the institutions that have studied the situation. These cover the care of and compensation for victims of abuse; the formation and accompaniment of seminarians, novices, priests and religious; and suggestions that "[mark] the path of the Church, from very different areas to end the scourge of sexual abuse" (n. 2). The report also mentions that the CEE is working on a Comprehensive Reparation Plan for Victims of Abuse (approved by the bishops in July 2024).

The study is completed by two appendices. The first includes the situation of each of the cases of abuse documented in the third chapter in a generic way for internal use by the Offices for the Protection of Minors. The second gathers together the protocols of Spanish ecclesial organisations on adult interactions with minors in Church spaces; how to respond when minors report any type of abuse, including sexual abuse; and how to prevent abuse.

The document also uses many sources. The data come from the diocesan offices and also the contributions of all the other studies carried out to date, including the legal and institutional audit delivered by the C-CS office and the most relevant contributions of the report by the Ombudsman in October 2023.

Some results in the report are consistent with the reports from other countries: the predominance of male victims over female victims; the age group with the highest prevalence; the abuse of power and authority; deficiencies in the affective and sexual formation of clerics; the institutional tendency to hide cases to protect the reputation of the Church; and absence of effective protocols for the detection and prevention of abuse.

Other data reflect a different profile in Spain compared to how the problem manifested in other countries: For example, the percentage of accused priests is less than 1% in relation to the overall number of priests in the country.

Finally, from the outset, the CEE ruled out investigating the profiles of the perpetrators, as the U.S. JJC report did, because the bishops of Spain said that they preferred to focus on the victims, on their care and healing, and on preventive measures. Consequently, the Spanish report lacks information on the guilty or accused priests.

A statistical analysis of the prevalence of sexual abuse of minors in Spanish society, similar to the Sauvé report commissioned by the French bishops is also lacking (Dressing et al. 2021).

In total, the number of priests who were proven to have committed CSA or certainty has been achieved in some way was 1,200. (At that time, there were 220,000 Catholic priests exercising the ministry in Spain, which makes 1,200 abusers the lowest percentage seen so far in national reports). This percentage is also low in comparison with official figures on CSA in Spain; according to the Ministry of the Interior, there were 8,337 cases of sexual abuse of minors in 2022 (Ministerio del Interior 2023: p. 8, 18).

Italian “non-report”

For many years, the Italian bishops resisted the call from the media and the example of some European colleagues and did not want to commission any report on the prevalence of clerical CSA in their country. Finally, in 2021, The Episcopal Conference of Italy (ital. *Conferenza Episcopale Italiana*, CEI) decided a mixed strategy: to release some data, but only on the present day and updating it every year, without looking to the past.

The first report, called “Proteggere, prevenire, formare” [To protect, prevent and train] was published in November 2022 (Conferenza Episcopale Italiana 2022), and covered allegations in most Italian dioceses in the period 2015–2020. The second report was released one year later, in November 2023, and the last one in May 2025 (Conferenza Episcopale Italiana 2023, 2025).

The methodology of those three studies, conducted by Church officials and not by an independent research team, are very similar: a compilation of the reports of abuse received in listening centers of the dioceses created for the victims. Similar too were the results of and the reaction from the faithful, the media and – as some reporters stated – from Vatican authorities were from lukewarm welcome as a good step forward, to upright unsatisfaction for being much less serious than other reports conducted in Europe, and not covering the period, in which at least in every country analysed their past clerical CSA was more extensive.

The 2025 report concerns allegations of abuse that reached the Italian dioceses between 2023 and 2024. 103 centers participated in the survey, referring to 130 dioceses out of a total of 206. Of these 103 counselling centers, in 2023 only 37 reported “1 or more contacts” of alleged victims of abuse, and 40 in 2024. As for the people accused of abuse, there are 67 in total, including 44 priests, 15 religious (friars or nuns) and 8 lay people. They are all men except two. As for the alleged lay abusers, their roles within the dioceses are different: catechists or educators, volunteers, collaborators, a religion teacher, a seminarian and a sacristan. The report also says that for only 14 of the 66 reports, the dioceses know that there has been a civil complaint.

Those numbers are in line with those of the two previous reports. The number of victims officially recognised by the CEI, combined with their past reports, totals 258 over the past five years. On the other hand, the number of people who reported abuse increased: for the period 2023–2024 there were 118, 70 percent of whom were minors; for the period 2020–2021 there were 89, 82 percent of whom were minors. Another difference with past reports concerns the gender of the alleged victims of abuse: in the 2022 report they were overwhelmingly female, while in the 2025 report more than half are male (64 out of 115 whose gender and age are known).

Obviously, this limitation to allegations received by Church offices probably means that the real numbers could be higher. According to victims, such as Francesco Zanardi, founder of the Italian “Rete L’Abuso” advocacy group, the picture painted by the partial reports is not full. (Esteves 2025).

“It’s difficult to understand these CEI reports because they have never looked at cases dating back to 2000. They said they would do it, but they didn’t,” Zanardi told the

American Catholic information agency. "It's difficult to compare because we don't know who the priests are or where the areas are." (Esteves 2025).

Conclusions

- 1) Good legislation on the protection of minors, such as that of European institutions, is an indispensable part of policies for the prevention and healing of abuse. However, they must be complemented by research on the past, which allows us to understand the circumstances that favor abuse in each society. In every aspect, investigations are fruitful investments.
- 2) Scientific investigation on the extent of sexual abuse of minors is a task that encounters many obstacles. In addition to requiring time and specialised equipment, it has to overcome the resistance of looking into hidden areas of institutional life and accepting responsibility for crimes committed in the past. At the same time, when you have the courage to do so, the path to healing individuals and families, and restoring justice becomes much easier. For that reason, it would be advisable that the EU authorities and national governments have the same courage as those Catholic episcopates to investigate.
- 3) The reports made by Catholic institutions have also served to raise awareness of the seriousness of the problem and the need for protocols and preventive measures. However, as there are no similar studies in other social environments, there is a danger that abuse will be associated with the religious sphere, and that this error will prevent solving the problem, which occurs in more than 90% of cases in other areas. It is therefore urgent that state authorities initiate investigations. State authorities need to be aware that tackling the issue requires law enforcement decisions but also measures for cultural change, supported by communication strategies.
- 4) Only independent research with public criteria is credible. Investigations by parties, or with limited access to sources, do not help solve the problem. European authorities should follow the example of Australian authorities, who considered child abuse a national cause.
- 5) It is very important to agree with researchers not only on the methodological conditions of their research work, but also on the guidelines for releasing its results, since the proper communication of findings is an important part of the research's main fruits. A defective communication (as happened in France and Spain) limits the beneficial effects of the exercise of transparency, in which an investigation consists of.

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