



Biani Lopez-Antunez, who was abused by a Legion of Christ school director in Cancun between the ages of 8 and 10 years old, speaks during an interview in Mexico City, March 3, 2020. Victims of clerical sex abuse have expressed skepticism over a Vatican investigative commission that will collect statements and information about abuse in Mexico, though most said they would meet with Pope Francis' investigators. "Only by speaking with them can you demand results," said Lopez-Antunez (AP/Fernando Llano)

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The Vatican's representative in Mexico said March 3 that four Catholic bishops had been referred to their superiors for alleged connections to cases of sexual abuse as part of the church's efforts to gather information about the possible cover up of abuse.

Nuncio Franco Coppola did not provide details on the bishops' possible roles, but noted that in January and December an email address opened to receive abuse allegations took in dozens of allegations, mostly accounts of cover ups.

Coppola made the comments at a news conference to announce that the Vatican would send its top sex abuse investigators to Mexico later in March. He acknowledged that the magnitude of the problem "eludes" them because while the Mexican Episcopal Conference says 217 priests are being investigated there are cases in which the religious order sent the complaint directly to Rome, meaning the number could be higher.

Victims of clerical sex abuse have expressed skepticism over the Vatican investigative commission that will collect statements and information about abuse in Mexico, though most said they would meet with Pope Francis' investigators.

"Only by speaking with them can you demand results," said Biani López-Antúnez, who was abused by a Legion of Christ school director in Cancun between the ages of 8 and 10 years old. "The results of this visit must be measured exclusively by the facts because I'm tired of the fake actions that operate at all levels of the Church."

The Vatican announced Tuesday that two investigators — Charles Scicluna, archbishop of Malta and deputy secretary for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and Jordi Bertomeu — will be in Mexico City March 20-27. They will meet with bishops, leaders of religious orders and victims who want to speak with them. They promise confidentiality.

Mexico, which has the second highest number of Catholics in the world, has been accumulating cases of abuse and cover-ups for years. Meanwhile more and more

victims like López-Antúnez are speaking up in the face of Vatican claims of "zero tolerance" to say they are still waiting for justice.

The Mexican Episcopal Conference says the commission is coming at its request. It is made up by the same church officials who went to Chile in 2018 to investigate one case and returned with 2,600 pages of statements from more than 60 victims. It led Francis to ask forgiveness and led to legal action.

Coppola said the investigators are coming because of the "seriousness" of the situation and because Mexico has such a large Catholic presence that it could become a model — "a good example or a bad example" — for other countries.

The investigators are allotting 30 minutes each to those who want to speak with them, so they recommend that they arrive with documents and written statements, Coppola said. The investigators will also meet with anyone from clergy to victims.



File photo of Archbishop Charles Scicluna, left, and Spanish Monsignor Jordi Bertomeu attending a meeting with the Catholic community at the Sacred Heart of Jesus church in Osorno, Chile, June 16, 2018. The Vatican is sending its top two sex

crimes investigators to Mexico on a fact-finding and assistance mission as the Catholic hierarchy in the world's second-largest Catholic country begins to reckon with decades of clergy sex abuse and cover-up. (AP/Fernando Lavozy)

Rogelio Cabrera, president of the Mexican Episcopal Conference said the investigators will have total freedom. "We won't even know who will go to speak with them or what topics they will discuss," he said.

It was not clear what collaboration the church officials will have with Mexican authorities, but the conference's secretary Alfonso Miranda said that they had met with Attorney General Alejandro Gertz Manero so "that each authority does its duty, the state prosecutors as well as each bishop in his diocese."

"There has to be intervention from some other external authority to determine criminal responsibility because if it is only the ecclesiastic commission, it's very difficult for something to happen," said Alberto Athié, a former Mexican priest who has campaigned for more than 20 years for victims of clerical abuse. If not, the commission could become just another example of the Vatican going through the motions but not getting to the bottom of it.

For that reason, Athié believes a proposal before the Mexican Senate to create an independent investigative commission is critical, because it could "reconstruct the truth and turn over to the proper authorities all of those responsible," including the abusers and those who covered up their actions.

The number of victims in Mexico is unknown.

The best known case in Mexico is that of Rev. Marcial Maciel, founder of the Legion of Christ religious order. The Vatican took over the Legion in 2010 after revelations that Maciel, sexually abused dozens of his seminarians, fathered at least three children and built a secretive, cult-like order to hide his double life.

The Mexican Episcopal Conference said in January that it was investigating 271 priests for abuse in the past decade, but it did not provide a number of victims.

Jesús Romero Colín, a psychologist and director of Inscide, a nongovernmental organization that supports victims of sexual abuse, said there could be thousands. Romero Colín himself was abused by a priest in his church when he was 11 years old.

"In my case, there were 20 victims and I was the only one who came forward," he said. "Of 50 victims that have come to our organization, only two filed formal complaints and there are priests who abused 100 or 130 victims."

Romero Colín's case is an exception. His abuser, Carlos López Valdez was the first priest convicted in Mexico of pederasty and is currently serving a 63-year prison sentence.

He said he will meet with the investigators. "The important thing is that the survivors have a direct line to the Vatican, we skip all the intermediaries," he said.

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