



All of the bishops of France attend a mass in Notre-Dame Cathedral in Lourdes, southwestern France, on Nov. 9, 2019. A French bishop has been given a preliminary charge of attempting to rape an adult man a decade ago, the Paris prosecutor's office said Monday Nov. 20, 2023. It is the latest of a growing number of accusations of sexual abuse by clergy in France. (AP Photo/Bob Edme, File)

by Associated Press

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A French bishop has been given a preliminary charge of attempting to rape an adult man a decade ago, the Paris prosecutor's office said Nov. 20. It is the latest of a growing number of accusations of sexual abuse by clergy in France.

The Bishops' Conference of France said the accused bishop, Georges Colomb, contests the charge and deserves the presumption of innocence. He has asked the Vatican to step aside from his duties as bishop of La Rochelle and Saintes in western France to prepare his defense.

French investigative website Mediapart reported that senior figures in the Catholic Church were aware of the accusations for years.

The allegations didn't reach prosecutors until May of this year. That's when lawyers for the Archdiocese of Paris and a Catholic group called the Foreign Missions of Paris, shortened to MEP in French, submitted a report of a rape attempt by Colomb in 2013, according to the prosecutor's office.

Colomb headed the MEP from 2010 to 2016, and his accuser was staying in MEP facilities at the time of the incident, according to French media reports. Colomb became a bishop in 2016.

As a result of the ensuing investigation, Colomb was detained for questioning last week and magistrates filed a preliminary charge on Nov. 17, the prosecutor's office said. Colomb is under judicial supervision and barred from contact with the victim or witnesses pending further investigation.

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His accuser has not been publicly named. After the alleged rape attempt, the man spoke about what happened to another official in the MEP, Gilles Reithinger.

Reithinger told public broadcaster France-3 that the man said Colomb proposed an oil massage that made him uncomfortable but didn't mention any sexual wrongdoing. Reithinger, now bishop of Strasbourg, said he raised the issue with Colomb's superior at the time but didn't see any reason to report the incident to prosecutors.

The bishops' conference said in a statement Nov. 20 that it expresses its concern for the alleged victim, and offered support for "all those who are troubled or hurt by this news."

A lawyer for Colomb did not respond to request for comment.

France is coming to terms with decades of covered-up abuse by church-related figures amid a global reckoning over the issue.

France's bishops' conference agreed to provide reparations after a 2021 report estimated some 330,000 children were sexually abused over 70 years by priests or other church-related figures in the country. The estimates were based on broader research by France's National Institute of Health and Medical Research into sexual abuse of children.