
France: combating paedophilia inside the Church. Increasing reports filed by the victims. Msgr. Blanchet, “a sign that words have been set free.”

“It’s a sign that words were set free”, said Msgr. Dominique Blanchet, Bishop of Belfort-Montbéliard, Vice-president of the French Episcopal Conference, in a livestreamed press conference held last night on the increasing numbers of victims of abuse who courageously contacted the bishops to report the violence they were subjected to in the past two years. In fact, there were 320 victims in the period 2018 -2020 compared to 220 in 2010-2016. The 3rd Report of the Bishops' Conference of France on combating paedophilia inside the Church, with an overview of the number of victims, complaints received in the dioceses, offenders, canonical measures taken and preventive measures put in place, was presented yesterday to the bishops gathered in Plenary Assembly (online). According to the Report, the rise in the number of identified victims can also be explained with the creation of an independent Commission on Sexual Abuse in the Church (CIASE) by the French bishops, reception and counselling centres in the dioceses, along with constant appeals to the victims to courageously denounce the abuse and contact the Church concerned. The Report also shows that in the period 2018-2020, the bishops submitted 110 abuse complaints to the Prosecutor's Offices. The complaints refer to episodes of serious offences submitted through official channels and in writing to the judicial authorities with the purpose of protecting a minor. Out of 110 reports, 67 relate to cases prior to 2000, while 43 concern cases occurring after the same year. In France, 15 dioceses have decided to stipulate an agreement with the competent prosecutors operating in the territory. With regard to the abusers, investigation procedures were initiated against 208 people in the period 2018 - 2020: 191 were reported by a victim; 8 were indicted (i.e. based on a decision by an investigating judge within the framework of a criminal investigation); 5 were sentenced to prison and 4 served out their sentences. With regard to canonical provisions taken by the Church, in the past two years, 57 priests, clergy and deacons have been temporarily suspended (pending a final decision based on the definitive outcome of the investigation) while 13 were punished with a penalty provided for in the Code of Canon Law against a person found guilty of a crime. Bishop Blanchet informed journalists that the bishops are working together with the victims to fight paedophilia in the Church, divided into four working groups. Stepping up preventive measures, especially in the dioceses, is on the agenda. One group is working on actions that “ensure that the Church shall be a safe home for all in the long term without ever losing the memory of what happened, so that it may never happen again.” A group is discussing the question of the abusers, with plans to draw up a "Vademecum" for the accompaniment of these people. The bishops are also confronted with the situation of priests who finished serving their prison sentence; those who are the subject of legal proceedings or complaints,” said Msgr. Blanchet. Sadly, there are also cases of priests who committed suicide after receiving a complaint, while others were suspended from ministry and awaiting trial. Finally, there is the question of financial compensation to the victims. The proposal is to create a “voluntary fund”, i.e. consisting of funds voluntarily donated by the faithful, making it clear that “it is not about helping the Church to give a certain amount of money to the victim. In fact its purpose is to help the victim according to the solidarity principle. This is a concrete gesture indicating that the whole Church seeks to take care of the tragically wounded brother or sister. We realized that we were not understood on this point and therefore we must work harder to make sure that the meaning of this gesture is communicated clearly.”

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