

Only secular law can bring justice to victims of mass clerical abuse in France

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Keith Porteous Wood says France's deference to the Catholic Church has obstructed justice for hundreds of thousands of abuse victims.

An inquiry commissioned by the Catholic Church into clerical abuse in France has just [concluded](#) that victims of both clerics and laity (teachers, for example) totalled around a third of a million since 1950.

In no country in the world has such a high figure been included in an official report. Nearly all victims were minors or vulnerable adults.

The commission, to its credit, held exhaustive hearings in every major town in France. But listening to so many harrowing testimonies took its toll. The president of the commission was not alone in needing psychological assistance.

At the public launch of the inquiry report, abuse survivor François Devaux told Church officials: "You are a disgrace to our humanity. In this hell there have been abominable mass crimes...betrayal of morality, [and] betrayal of children".

The report concluded: "The Catholic Church is, after the circle of family and friends, the environment that has the highest prevalence of sexual violence." Its president accused the Church of "sometimes knowingly putting children in touch with predators."

Prior to this week, the president of the commission was sticking hard to his estimate of 10,000+ victims. In correspondence with him I pointed out the implausibility of this low figure. The final number arrived at by his multidisciplinary team is 330,000.

The estimated number of perpetrators, just 3,000, remains bafflingly small – it equates to 2.6% of priests. In contrast, state-commissioned inquiries by Australia and England & Wales both found 7% of Catholic priests to be perpetrators. The resultant ratio of victims to priests and lay perpetrators cited by the report is a completely implausible - 110:1. A much more realistic figure would be in the range of 10,000 to 30,000 perpetrators - maybe too many for the bishops to handle? Let's hope not.

The key question is, what happens next? Having studied the French Catholic Church closely over the last two years, I'm convinced it's institutionally incapable of putting its own house in order. Even while the report was being written, bishops were distancing themselves from accepting any responsibility. They refused to let their fabulously rich church bear even a centime of the meagre compensation (they recoiled from even using the word), determining that it should be dependent on the amount raised by public subscription. It's thought reparations were conditional on the abandonment of any civil or criminal action. Quite a bargain, for them.

While some give the Church credit for commissioning the report, in my opinion, the Church only did so because it realised that if it did not, the scandals would sooner or later result in a state inquiry.

Such an inquiry would have the power to require the production of documents, summon witnesses and examine them under oath.

One of the commission's recommendations was revisions to canon 'law'. Canon 'law' is not an appropriate mechanism for enforcing such rampant criminality; for example, the maximum penalty is removal from the clerical state. The Vatican was [urged](#) by the United Nations in 2014 to require such abuse to be reported to the secular authorities, something the current Pope, to his shame, still refuses to do so. He only acts on clerical abuse when absolutely forced to, and usually as little as he can get away with.

It is beyond regrettable that the French state did not institute its own inquiry, as Australia, Germany and England & Wales have done. In contrast, the French National Assembly ignored the matter almost entirely, and the senate's hearings amounted to little more than the Church being asked to sort the matter out itself. That was a monumental failure of secularism.

Devaux accused the Church of cowardice. I charge the state of cowering before the Church. It is almost as if the Revolution never happened; for all practical purposes, the French Church remains above the law and that is the greatest single reason for this, doubtlessly centuries-old, catastrophe.

A state inquiry is still desperately needed. Its terms of reference could be much wider than the commission's. They must include reform of the law and an examination of why around 25 bishops have failed to observe the mandatory reporting law with complete impunity.

The papal adviser on abuse Prof Hans Zollner [said](#) yesterday: "If a bishop has not done what the law of his State, and Canon Law, demands of him, then yes [he should resign]." So does that mean we are about to have 25 vacancies? Somehow I doubt it.

France's mandatory reporting law, and the statutes of limitation on abuse and reporting, need urgent reform. As is also needed in the UK, there must be a law requiring those in institutions, including churches, to report reasonable suspicions of abuse to the secular authorities, with safeguards protecting those doing so in good faith. An example of how that might look is [here](#).

No solution is possible without a fit-for-purpose secular law on abuse, and enforcement of such law without fear or favour. France, at present, lacks both.

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Keith Porteous Wood

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