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The President of the Spanish Episcopal Conference, Cardinal Juan Jose Omella, centre, speaks during a press conference in Madrid, Spain, on Feb. 22, 2022. Spain's ombudsman said Monday March 13, 2023 that an independent commission set up a year ago to investigate historic sex abuse by the Catholic church has collected testimonies from 445 victims, as the nation belatedly tackles an issue many other European countries acted on long ago. (AP Photo/Paul White, File)

by The Associated Press

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Madrid — March 14, 2023

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Spain's ombudsman said March 13 that an independent commission set up a year ago to investigate historic sex abuse by the Catholic church has collected testimonies from 445 victims, as the nation tackles an issue other European countries acted on long ago.

Spain's parliament voted on March 10, 2022 to open the first official investigation, led by ombudsman Ángel Gabilondo, into the extent of sexual abuse committed by priests and church officials. The government was forced to act after allegations of abuse involving more than 1,200 victims were published in Spanish newspaper El País, provoking public outrage.

Testimonies were still being collected and an update would be issued in parliament before the current government's term expires this year, Gabilondo's office said in a statement. Although "satisfied" with the number of victims who felt able to come forward, "what really matters is to listen to the victims ... with respect, seriousness, discretion and confidentiality," it added.

A Madrid-based law firm is conducting a parallel inquiry ordered by the Spanish Episcopal Conference, which for years rejected the idea of taking a comprehensive approach to investigating sex abuse.

In a sign that bishops may yet to have fully cooperated with the government-ordered probe, the Spanish ombudsman said that a year after receiving his mandate, "we are requesting the collaboration of different levels of the Catholic Church and we hope to be able to count on it soon."

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Only a handful of countries have had government-initiated or parliamentary inquiries into abuse like Spain's.

The most extensive took place in Australia and found in 2017 that 7% of Catholic priests were accused of abusing minors between 1980 and 2010. Judge-led investigations in Ireland from 2005 impacted the Catholic Church's once-dominant influence in Irish society and politics.

And in France, an independent inquiry estimated in 2021 that some 330,000 children were victims of sexual abuse by Catholic clergy or other Catholic-affiliated lay employees from 1950-2020.

In neighboring Portugal, an expert panel said last month that more than 4,800 individuals may have been victims of child sex abuse in the Catholic Church.