



Abbé Pierre, a well-known activist for the poor and the homeless who died in 2007 at the age of 94, is pictured in this Oct. 3, 2002, file photo. French Catholics were shocked to learn July 17, 2024 of the "sexual assault or sexual harassment" allegations against the famed priest. (OSV News/Philippe Wojazer, Reuters)

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The French Catholic Church has formally requested that prosecutors initiate an investigation into Abbé Pierre, a once-revered priest and humanitarian icon who died in 2007, following new revelations of sexual violence.

Archbishop Éric de Moulins-Beaufort, president of the French Bishops Conference (CEF), announced the move during an interview on RMC radio on Friday. “We must get to the bottom of the truth — uncover any additional victims, accomplices, and failures to report these crimes,” he said.

Who was Abbé Pierre?

Born Henri Grouès in 1912, Abbé Pierre was a French Catholic priest renowned for his dedication to aiding the poor and homeless.

In 1949, he founded the Emmaüs movement, an international organization focused on combating poverty and homelessness.

His humanitarian efforts, especially during the harsh winter of 1954, garnered him widespread admiration, and he was often regarded as the conscience of France.

Emergence of allegations

The allegations against Abbé Pierre surfaced posthumously, significantly tarnishing his legacy years after his death.

In July 2024, Emmaüs International and the Fondation Abbé Pierre released a report detailing accusations from seven women, including one who was a minor at the time, alleging sexual assault and harassment by Abbé Pierre between the late 1970s and 2005.

Following these initial revelations, a dedicated channel for victims led to 17 additional accusations, with incidents reportedly occurring from the 1950s to the 2000s across various countries, including France, the United States, Morocco and Switzerland.

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Church's response

In light of the allegations, Moulins-Beaufort, president of the French Bishops' Conference, announced during an interview on RMC radio that the church has formally requested prosecutors to open an investigation into Abbé Pierre.

He emphasized the necessity of uncovering the full truth, identifying any additional victims, accomplices and instances where these crimes were not reported.

The bishops conference also issued a statement Friday highlighting the gravity of the allegations and acknowledging past failures in heeding warnings.

It underscored the need for judicial action to uncover the full extent of the abuse and any systemic silences that may have allowed it to persist.

A significant chapter in France's ongoing abuse scandals

The allegations against Abbé Pierre represent a key development in France's broader reckoning with clerical abuse.

In 2021, the Independent Commission on Sexual Abuse in the Church reported that an estimated 330,000 children were sexually abused over 70 years by clergy or church-affiliated individuals.

The report highlighted a systemic coverup by church officials and called for significant reforms.

Church's reparations for abuse victims

To address decades of abuse, the French Church launched a reparations program in 2022, overseen by the Independent National Authority for Recognition and Reparation (INIRR).

The program offers financial compensation and psychological support to victims.

By March 2023, over 1,180 victims had come forward, with 404 receiving support from the INIRR.

Approximately 201 victims had already been granted financial or other reparations, which can also include non-financial support like organizing family mediation or installing memorials for victims.

Compensation amounts range up to 60,000 euros (\$63,000), with most recipients reporting “very serious” crimes, including rape or repeated abuse over years.

Critics argue that systemic reform of the church is still needed.