



Archbishop Éric de Moulins-Beaufort of Reims, president of the French bishops' conference, attends Pope Francis' departure ceremony at the Ajaccio airport on the French island of Corsica Dec. 15, 2024. (OSV News/Ludovic Marin, pool via Reuters)

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The president of French bishops' conference has officially requested that prosecutors open an investigation into the case of Abbé Pierre, following new sexual assault allegations against the once iconic priest and advocate of the poor.

Archbishop Éric de Moulins-Beaufort of Reims announced on Jan. 17 that a request to prosecutors had been sent on Jan. 14, following the revelation of new sexual assaults committed between the 1970s and early 2000s by Pierre.

"Only the Judiciary has the necessary means of investigation to enable the whole truth to be revealed about the silences and non-reporting from which Abbé Pierre may have benefited," the bishops' conference statement said.

The priest, who died in 2007 at age 94, was a former Resistance fighter and member of parliament. In 1949, he founded the Emmaus Community for the poor. Well-known in France, the association went on to expand internationally. Pierre was admired at home and abroad far beyond the church.

It was his own community, Emmaus — both its international and French branch, along with the Abbé Pierre Foundation — that released to the public the accusations and results of an investigation into the allegations of abuse committed against "several women" between "the end of the 1970s and 2005," the organizations said in a joint July 17 statement.

The Emmaus movement confirmed the testimonies included accounts of abuse of a minor at the time of the events. It announced the creation of a commission of independent experts to continue the investigation. They then turned to a specialized consultancy, Egaé, to investigate other possible victims.

In July and September 2024, Egaé published two reports on a large number of accusations of sexual harassment and assault committed by Pierre. The outrage sparked back then was reinforced on Jan. 13, when new testimonies were presented, including a rape of a minor and sexual assaults of an incestuous nature.

"The accumulation of now known facts perpetrated by this priest, who was so admired, is horrifying," the French bishops said Jan. 13.

"The Conference of Bishops thinks with immense sorrow of all the victims left behind by Abbé Pierre. Realizing that he used his media aura and the social work he had built — arousing, in his wake, the commitment of so many French people to serve the poorest — to sexually abuse women, children, and people in precarious situations, is appalling. The Conference of Bishops expresses its closeness to all," the bishops said.

Over 30 verified testimonials published in recent months reveal the usual strategies of manipulation, pressure and blackmail used by Pierre to achieve his ends.

"All these elements put together paint the picture of a predator," Tarek Daher, general delegate of Emmaus, a movement with 40,000 members, told Le Parisien Jan. 13.

In a Jan. 17 radio interview, de Moulins-Beaufort praised the "work of truth" undertaken by the Emmaus movement, and the "courage" of the victims who testified. "Telling the truth is like reliving it," he told the French RMC radio.

For the president of the bishops' conference, the investigation must continue, even if for his part, the Egaé firm has completed its work. "We must get to the bottom of the truth," he said. "These people who are victims are saying appalling things. With each report, we cross a threshold in the discovery of what Abbé Pierre may have done and the kind of system he seems to have built."

When Emmanuel announced the establishment of the commission to investigate Pierre in September 2024, the bishops' conference announced it was opening — to all researchers and journalists — the archives of the church of France concerning Abbé Pierre.

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"The archives show that in the years 1955-1957, the bishops of the time were beginning to learn about Abbé Pierre's sexual behavior," de Moulins-Beaufort explained to RMC radio. "At the time, they tried to do things," he added. "They tried to limit his interventions. They tried to warn the authorities not to put him forward."

They sent him to a clinic in Switzerland because they thought he could be cured. It was a time, in the 1960s, when people thought it was possible to cure this kind of behavior, with electroshock therapy."

"But we can clearly see, in the archives, that Abbé Pierre escaped all these measures," de Moulins-Beaufort admitted. "I am talking about society as a whole, not just the church," he pointed out. "Abbé Pierre was a public figure. He largely lived outside any ecclesiastical framework. For years and years, he did not live in a presbytery, or in an ecclesiastical setting."

For the archbishop, the discretion of other institutions and associations outside the church, in which Pierre worked, was the same as that of the church. "It is striking that so many biographers and filmmakers have taken an interest in Abbé Pierre without any victims feeling authorized to speak out," he said.

Today, researchers and journalists are stepping up their investigations in all directions. On Dec. 13, 2024, the national daily Le Monde published a story titled: "Letters from future sexual predator Abbé Pierre reveal a man tormented from an early age."

"Driven by a deep concern for transparency, the Capuchins accepted Le Monde's request to consult Brother Philippe's monastic correspondence," Le Monde said, revealing a hopeful trend in the church — seeking transparency on every level of investigation.

Pierre was born Henri Grouès and became Brother Philippe at age 19 after receiving the Capuchin habit on Nov. 21, 1931, at the novitiate of Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours, in Saint-Etienne.

"He remained there for a year, then continued his ecclesiastical career at the Couvent de Crest (Crest Convent, southwest France), until the spring of 1939. It was then that he asked to leave the order, shortly after his ordination to the priesthood," Le Monde wrote, reveling in their investigation that the once-admired churchman was abused himself by older pupils when he was a student of a boarding school in Lyon — a fact he reveals in his letters.

For their part, French prefects, mayors and other public officials have been taking steps since last September to change the names of hundreds of streets, roads, schools and bus stops in France named after Pierre, particularly in Normandy, where

he is buried.

In December, the Abbé Pierre Foundation, which ran an advertising campaign in the run-up to Christmas to raise funds for its work on behalf of the most disadvantaged, specified in its posters that it was changing its name. However, the Foundation's aim is to remain identifiable, so that it can continue to receive the donations that enable it to take action.