

# Giving silence \_\_\_\_\_ a Voice

Independent Commission for the  
Study of Child Sexual Abuse in the  
Portuguese Catholic Church

FINAL REPORT  
Executive Summary

LISBON, FEBRUARY 2023

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. At the end of 2021 D. José Ornelas, President of the Portuguese Episcopal Conference (CEP) invited Pedro Strecht to set up an **Independent Commission for the Study of Child Sexual Abuse in the Portuguese Catholic Church**. The Commission started working in January 2022, setting a timetable of one year to complete its work and to submit a report.

Pedro Strecht (Commission Chairman, child and adolescent psychiatrist) selected a gender-balanced multidisciplinary team to include recognized professionals with varied career paths: Alvaro L. Lucio, retired judge-counsellor; Ana Nunes de Almeida, sociologist; Catarina Vasconcelos, filmmaker; Daniel Sampaio, psychiatrist; Filipa Tavares, social worker. Sociologist Vasco Ramos, clinical psychologist Ana Sofia Varela and journalist Catarina Pires also worked directly with the Commission throughout.

For the study of the Church's Archives, the Commission invited historian Francisco Azevedo Mendes to set up an independent **Historical Research Group (GIH)** with three other researchers: gender studies specialist Júlia Garraio and historians Rita Almeida Carvalho and Sérgio Ribeiro Pinto.

2. The Commission identified itself wholly as **a study group**, that is to say, as a team of professionals dedicated to developing knowledge on the topic of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church during the period of time specified in its mandate. From the outset it thus ruled out any role as a judicial body looking for denunciations or allegations and, in a different perspective, as an intervention and support team in the field of mental health.

In the course of its work, the Commission had numerous contacts with organisations of the Church and civil society, with particular emphasis on those who protect and intervene on behalf of minor and adult victims. The same emphasis governed contacts with the competent legal authorities in this case, namely the Public Prosecutor's Office.

In order to publicise its appeals for witness statements, the Commission relied on the media and other forms of contact. A phone number was made available to receive testimonies, and a website was built to host an online survey. The Commission also made it possible for information to be sent by post, and provided for the possibility of in-person interviews.

3. The objective of the Commission's work was defined as the study of child sexual abuse by members of the Church and/or those who worked with it, between 1950 and 2022, with a view to obtaining a better understanding of the past and of what action is best suited to action and preventing abuse in the future.

4. Taking as its point of reference for sexual abuse all types of such abuse as defined in the Portuguese Penal Code, the Commission made **a fundamental methodological choice**: to put the abuse victim at the centre of its work, encouraging

them to bear witness, giving them a voice, and making them the protagonists of a traumatic experience which it was necessary to get to know, to describe and to interpret. The work was not therefore an institutional analysis, nor did the study consider the life experience and trajectories of the abusers.

The study incorporated **qualitative and quantitative approaches** to the topic. The qualitative aspect is to be found in victims' testimony and their individual stories (captured during in-person interviews and by analysing their direct responses to the open questions in the survey), through which the Commission sought to investigate in depth and to interpret specific experiences of abuse. Members of the Commission also interviewed diocesan bishops and superiors general of Portuguese religious institutes. The **quantitative** approach focused on analysis of all the survey material deriving from standardized response questions, for an extensive treatment of the information collected (bi- and multivariate statistics), putting together numerical indicators and comparing them to each other, with a view to describing the abuse in several different dimensions.

The Commission also undertook content analysis of news in the national and local Press. In addition the GIH, having obtained written permission from the Vatican, carried out an exploratory study of the historical archives of the Portuguese Church in every diocese and in some religious institutes.

5. An in-depth examination of **the concept of child sexual abuse** was conducted, adopting different disciplinary angles, namely the psychopathological and the legal (together with a review of their respective literatures).

**6. From the psychopathological point of view**, the topic of child sexual abuse has only recently come to focus on the suffering of the victim and its subsequent impact in terms of trauma. A major landmark in developments in this area was the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which included articles in defence of children's best interests.

Abuse of children (minors under 18 years of age) is more common than is generally accepted. Data from a meta-analysis reveal a prevalence of 18% in the female population and 8% in the male. Abuse includes several situations currently defined by law. In general, there are more girl victims than boys, and the most common age for abuse is pre-adolescence. Most abuse takes place on a continuous basis, in physical spaces where the child is socialised, above all the family. It is committed by mostly male abusers, many of them part of the child's prior network of relations, contributing to perpetuation of the crime.

It is usually the victims who opt to **remain silent**, on account of their feelings of **fear, shame and guilt**. Those who reveal what they have undergone are in a significant minority. When they do, there are no typical precedents, and they do so in front of people who are close to them; future progression of the abuse depends on the latter's attitude. Both at the time the abuse takes place and in subsequent stages of adult life, psychological and/or psychiatric help is needed to deal with various clinical symptoms such as the anxiety and depression associated with post-traumatic stress. There is no evidence that the majority of victims subsequently become abusers, but it is known that children who were abused in closed organisations or institutions tend to perpetuate it

later, reproducing pathological relationships of warped hierarchy and power over other minors.

**Abuser profiles** are varied. They are mostly young adults with symptoms of psychopathology, aggravated by risk factors like alcoholism and poor impulse control. Personality disorders are prominent, while some socially integrated aspects provide evidence of an ability to seduce and manipulate. They rarely acknowledge their acts, and lack a critical conscience, so that they commonly continue to abuse. Instances of successful therapy are rare, but it is fundamentally important to remove abusers from their posts and from activities which involve contact with children. In the case of abusers from a religious background, spiritual follow-up is important, but it is not enough. Intensive and long-lasting psychiatric and psychological work is required.

**7. In legal terms** (in both civil and canon law), the definition of child sexual abuse has a long history. “The child as legal subject”, a definition accepted today, is still not a universal given. It is the result of the psycho-social way we look at the person who is under 18 years of age, treating her as “a child” and no longer as “a minor”. It is on the basis of that definition as child that the relevant legislation is to be defined.

**The Commission adopted the definition of sexual abuse** provided for in the **Portuguese Penal Code** in its current version. Among the legislative changes to this definition between 1950 and 2022, the revision of 1995 is perhaps the most significant, in that, for the first time in Portugal, sexual crimes were defined as “**crimes against the person**”. In particular we should note that, where the victim was a child, these crimes were incorporated in a separate section of the Code, under the heading of “crimes against sexual self-determination”. These changes reflected the abandonment, first of all, of the provisions of the 1886 Code, which included such crimes under the heading of “crimes against honesty”, and secondly and more recently, those of the 1982 Code, which described them as “crimes against the values and interests of life in society”.

**Canon Law** initially regarded the practice of sexual abuse by members of the clergy as “corruption of youth”, a crime envisioned by the institution and severely punished. Alignment with the Vatican Council (1869, Pius IX) initiated an era during which description of these facts in the public domain was avoided, allegedly to defend the good name of the Church itself. This was the inspiration for Canon Law in its 1917 and 1983 versions, the latter being approved in line with Vatican II (1961, John XXIII). Despite the opening up which took place at that time, the provisions of Vatican II regarding sexual abuse in general, and child sexual abuse in particular, continued to fall under the “Sixth Commandment of the Decalogue” and, on the other hand, under “good manners”. The Church was still regarded as the main victim of its offending members’ acts.

The position recently adopted by Pope Francis is significant. Amongst other texts, he published his apostolic letter “Vos Estis Lux Mundi”, in the form of a *motu proprio*. In this document he expressly states that “the crimes of sexual abuse offend Our Lord, cause physical, psychological and spiritual damage to the victims and harm the community of the faithful”.

In this respect it is not and never would be the purpose of the Commission to undertake any criminal investigation, given that in Portugal it is the **Public Prosecutor’s Office** (**Ministério Público**) which is tasked exclusively with both criminal prosecutions and the

management of criminal investigations, whether carried out by itself or another criminal policing organ. It was made clear from the outset that any information extracted from witness statements which might reveal criminal activity of this kind would be submitted to the Public Prosecutor, provided that those acts had been perpetrated on a date still within the time limit for initiating criminal procedures. In such cases the Commission would not be party to the case, but rather a link between the testimony provided and the judicial body exclusively responsible for the initiating the corresponding legal process. The Commission submitted 25 cases to the Public Prosecutor. It is not surprising that there are very few results in such cases, a situation which, moreover, is like that in other countries or with commissions which undertook similar studies.

The Commission received a significant number of witness statements containing names of abusers and details of where the alleged abuse took place. Some of the people mentioned have since died, while others are alive and retain their positions in the Church. The Commission decided to notify the Public Prosecutor of the latter, while all of these details are included in an annex to this report, to be submitted to the CEP.

**8. The methodological tools** in this study are those commonly applied in the social sciences: the questionnaire survey and the interview. At the same time, however, the Commission followed a study tradition in the field of History by analysing documentation in the archives: in this particular case and for the first time in Portugal, bearing in mind the topic under study, in those of the Catholic Church itself.

**9.** When the work began, it was announced that **a telephone line** would be set up to collect contacts and witness statements for inclusion in the final sample, up to 31 October 2022. Specialist members of the Commission answered calls to the number 91 711 00 00 daily from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., with a facility for recorded messages to be left outside these hours. They were available to analyse the reasons for the call, record testimonies by filling out the survey and to direct callers whose cases fell outside the scope of the Commission's work to other institutions or organisations.

A total of 365 calls were recorded during the period in question. Average call time was 50 minutes, and 46% of all calls took place within the first three months. Peak times reflected occasions when the Commission's work was publicised on television. Several callers rang more than once, adding new information or posing new questions. There was a small number of blank or inappropriate calls.

Nearly all requests for in-person interviews (51, from various parts of the country) were made by phone. Where victims resided outside continental Portugal, interviews were held online, using Zoom. Of these 51 persons, 34 (23 men and 11 women) were direct victims of abuse. In the remaining 17 cases, contact was made for reference purposes or for the submission of relevant documentation.

All interviews were conducted by two members of the Commission. The time allocated for each was 60 minutes, which was exceeded in most cases. A uniform methodology was adopted, initially focused on recording the victim's free discourse, then moving on to a standard pattern of semi-structured interview, always respecting each person's own pace, which was frequently affected by the very intense emotions involved.

In several cases this was the first time victims had spoken on what had happened, and some of them requested that someone close to them be present with them at interview.

**10. Content analysis of newspaper articles** was a key area of study. Given that the time period covered was 1950 to 2022, there were significant differences in coverage of the topic, reflecting social, cultural and political changes. Censorship in Portugal up until 1974 was a major limiting factor for the publication of abuse-related news. For this reason most of this analysis relates to the period after the revolution of April 1974.

An online search was carried out using keywords related to child sexual abuse. Subsequently the same words were searched for in a sample of national and regional newspapers, taking into account the length of time they had been in existence, coverage, and national and regional significance. Searches were also carried out in those archives of media organisations which have been digitalised and are easily accessible. A clear pattern emerged, of increasing coverage of the topic over time, nearly always associated with facts which came to light as result of court cases or when investigative reporting uncovered certain facts which until then were not known. This work produced records of 19 cases of abuse.

The role of the **media** was fundamental both in disseminating the appeal for witnesses and information on the topic and for the investigation of specific cases in civil society.

**11. A questionnaire survey** was placed online on the site “darvozaosilencio.org” (Giving Silence a Voice), victims who completed it being assured of anonymity. Surveys are a technique which makes it possible to collect and handle information on the characteristics, behaviours, values and opinions of large populations or groups, using a representative sample. The aim was to construct profiles of abused persons and to detail the type of abuse perpetrated and the context in which it took place, together with its impact on the victim. Profiles of abusers were also created. In addition, the Commission sought to gather opinions on relevant measures to be adopted for the future by the Portuguese Catholic Church.

The survey sought to combine typically quantitative elements (standardised multiple choice and binary yes/no filters allowing for immediate statistical handling) with a more qualitative and personalised approach (producing direct free writing, not subject to any prior format or content, to be exhaustively content analysed later on). No questions were asked about victims’ or abusers’ identities (names, addresses, contact details).

The survey was viewed 2771 times and completed by 564 persons who provided testimony. The average time spent on each was 22 minutes. 512 victim witness statements were validated. The script was developed using inclusive, clear, simple and realistic language which respected each individual’s ability or need to report precisely and only that which he or she wished to reveal.

Following chronological development, **the script** focused on two distinct moments in time in the life of the interviewee. From the present day, it requested information of a sociographical nature on victims (e.g. gender, year of birth, place of abode, occupation, level of educational attainment, religion and religious practice, household and family of origin).

From the past, it requested that victims go back in time to their childhood and adolescence, when they suffered abuse, and provide detailed information on their life at that time, the type of abuse and who the abuser had been.

**12.** In order to **validate** the witness statements the Commission looked for consistency and sought to weed out untrue information. Age categories outside the stipulated parameters were excluded, as were accounts distorted by traumatic memories and confabulations.

**13.** A **respondent-driven sample** was obtained. This type of sample is particularly suitable for progressively uncovering information about groups which have been “concealed” or silenced.

The fact that the survey was online meant that respondents needed to have IT skills, which are unevenly distributed in the Portuguese population. Those who are older, have lower educational attainment levels, or are manual workers are at a disadvantage compared to younger people, those who have been to university or those who work with computers and the Internet on a daily basis or in their jobs. Completing a questionnaire involves some familiarity with a type of rationality which is both logical and abstract, and this may exclude certain people at the margins. Beyond technology-related limitations, the ability to speak out and the strength of personality to do so consistently is very unevenly distributed. It is therefore not possible to extrapolate from this sample to the wider world. The probability of being included in the sample is not the same for every person abused by a member of the Catholic Church. Nor does the sample reflect in their entirety the social and demographic characteristics of the universe so sampled.

**14.** Although the primary focus of this Commission’s study was on persons who had been victims of sexual abuse in childhood and adolescence, it seemed to us that we ought to hear what the **current leaders of the Church** (diocesan bishops, and superiors general) had to say. Being at the top of the institution, they were in a privileged position to provide information on the topic under study, not least because it was on their initiative that this study was commissioned.

It was interesting to reconstruct their life stories, which have been shaped by the social and cultural fabric of which they are a part. Understanding where they had come from was a valuable element in our appreciation of how they think of their roles within the Catholic Church and how they fulfil them today. It became clear early on that the Church did not speak with just one voice, whether explicitly or implicitly. Studying that internal plurality was a worthwhile endeavour.

These interviews lasted on average an hour. With one unexpected exception, they were nearly all conducted by two female members of the Commission. The interview script was purposely open and not very directive. The total number of interviews held was 32 (19 bishops, 13 superiors general)

**15.** Another area of the Commission’s work was an exploratory study of the **Church’s historic archives**. For the first time a group of social scientists, the GIH - *Grupo*

*de Investigação Histórica* (Historical Research Group) was given access to the archives of Portuguese dioceses and religious institutes for the purpose of analysing documents which might reveal situations of child sexual abuse between 1950 and 2022.

The study involved consulting several sets of documents, some more confidential than others: institutional documents, like the index cards containing details of the appointment of parish priests, more sensitive documentation such as ecclesiastical letters, preliminary investigations and administrative papers relating to criminal cases. Some of this documentation is in the secret files of the dioceses and religious institutes. The GIH did preliminary mapping of the different ways in which the ecclesiastical archives were organised, with the aim of identifying where evidence for and proof of sexual abuse might be found. In addition to the secret files – where preliminary investigation and criminal case documentation is stored – the priority was to look at individual clergymen’s cases and the ecclesiastical correspondence.

GIH access to documentation which was so confidential was discussed and agreed beforehand among the Catholic hierarchy and between it and the GIH. A letter of 9 June 2022 from the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, made it possible to open the Portuguese ecclesiastical files up to the GIH.

The GIH started contacting diocesan bishops and superiors of the religious institutes from June 2022 onwards, to agree times for the team to visit the archives, on presentation of their methodological notes as approved by the Vatican. Confidentiality agreements were signed, with the GIH undertaking to make all documentary data collected anonymous.

The first stage of the research work involved asking the 21 dioceses and the 127 religious institutes based in Portugal to carry out a survey of the number of child sexual abuse cases in their archives from 1950 to 2022. All the bishops and religious institutes responded to the survey. In the second stage, GIH members visited the archives to consult the corresponding documentation. They also consulted other documents relating to members of the Church about whom the group had obtained, through other channels, evidence of possible sexual abuse (e.g. testimonies to the Commission and the Press). The testimonies were systematically matched to ecclesiastical records, identifying the dioceses and religious institutes involved. In some of the files the group made random searches on a case-by-case or systematic basis. For some of these cases, the files contained no individual records for each priest containing all the relevant documentation, but only copies of outward and inward correspondence and chronologically filed inward correspondence. The extent of this documentation (hundreds of files) made it impossible to do a full analysis within the time frame for submitting this report.

The GIH had been instructed by the Commission to start its research from 29 March 2022 onwards, but the time required for internal discussion in the Portuguese Catholic Church on how it would open up its archives meant that GIH only started working on the documents in early October. This meant that the group has made only a preliminary archival approach to an issue which has been little studied in Portugal. Even so, this study, which was of an exploratory nature, generated significant knowledge of the topic and will no doubt open up a path for future, more thorough, in-depth and systematic research.



**16.** Several **ethical dilemmas** arose in the course of the Commission's work. These were discussed and dealt with in a team setting. From the medical, psychological and legal points of view, the Commission always ensured that victim anonymity was maintained – whether in the confidentiality of communications with the Public Prosecutor's Office (in non-proscribed cases), contacts with the media, co-ordination with the CEP or when consulting the Church's archives. The witness statement database was shielded from the outside world.

The following are some of the ethical issues which the Commission faced:

- Maintaining the impartiality and independence of the Commission itself. These were assured through the academic and professional qualifications of its members and the assertion of its autonomy vis-a-vis any type of power, including that of the Church itself which had commissioned the study;
- The impact of news on the victims, both those who had had the courage to speak out and others who chose to remain silent, given that the very fact of raising the subject revisits the trauma;
- The question of “numbers” - of those abused and of the abusers. This was dealt with by defining different thresholds;
- The relationship with the media;
- The importance of getting across to the public the message that there is a distinction to be made between the parts (those members of the Church who perpetrated abuse) and the whole (the Portuguese Catholic Church).

The Commission was made aware that some alleged abusers were still active in the Church and that there is therefore a risk that they may continue to commit the same crimes: a list was prepared on the basis of the data collected. Names were submitted to the Public Prosecutor as the work progressed, and a complete list of the names was provided to it on completion.

**17. Statistical analysis of the database produced by the sample** and interpretation of the subjective data derived from open questions were carried out using the 512 testimonies received.

Results revealed that the number of males is significantly higher than females. They represent 57.2% of cases compared to 42.2% for females. In comparison with similar studies, this is a very high percentage difference. The current average age of the sample is 52.4 years; 88.5% of the victims live in Portugal, but testimonies were also received from persons now living in Western Europe, the Americas and Africa. In Portugal, the five districts with the highest numbers, in descending order were Lisbon, Porto, Braga, Setúbal and Leiria. 53% of those in the sample are Catholic, 25.8% of them practising. 40.9% are married, and 60% have children (an average of 1.99 per couple). 32.4% of respondents have a university degree, 12.9% of them have Master's degrees. The main occupations represented are “specialists in intellectual and scientific fields”, which demonstrates the biased nature of the sample.

At the time they were first abused, 58.6% of the child victims were living with their parents, the vast majority of them in ‘couple with children’ family units (54.9%).

Approximately 1 in 5 victims were living in institutions and 7.8% in monoparental arrangements.

The majority of these children were abused between the ages of 10 and 14, the average age being 11.2. There is a difference here between girls and boys: 11.7 years as opposed to 10.5 years.

The largest number of instances of sexual abuse in time took place between the beginning of the 1960s up to 1990, a period which accounts for 58.3% of testimonies. The period from 1991 to the present day accounts for 21.9% of cases. Over the years there was an increase in the age at which abuse first took place.

The geographical location of first abuse is significantly dispersed over 129 of the country's 308 districts. Those with the highest number of cases, in descending order are Lisbon, Porto, Braga, Santarém and Aveiro.

On the date the abuse took place, most victims were studying (88.1%), and attending the first and second cycles of the education system (58.5% of cases).

The main types of abuse are manipulation of the sexual organs, masturbation, oral and anal sex as well as full copulation.

The type of abuse varies according to gender. The main types of abuse among boys are anal sex, manipulation of the sexual organs and masturbation, and verbal innuendo among girls.

Over the years there was an increase in types of abuse involving masturbation and oral sex, and viewing of child pornography.

The places where abuse took place, in descending order, were: seminaries (23% of cases), church otherwise unspecified (18.8%), confessional (14.3%), rectory (12.9%) and religious school (6.9%). There was a decline in the use of seminaries over the period. At times there were peaks of cases in places outside the Church, such as among boy scout groups between 1991 and 2010.

57.2% of the testimonies mention that abuse took place on more than one occasion. "For more than a year" was the duration mentioned by 27.5% of respondents, the types of abuse many and ongoing. They are reported as coming to an end when "the victim went away" from the place and/or person in question (31.6%), and as a result of the victim's greater "capacity for physical and psychological self-defence" in 31.4% of cases.

Among abuser profiles the following stand out: 96.9% are male, 77% of cases involve "the Priest", and in 46.7% of cases the perpetrator was already known to the victim.

Age of the abuser, types of abuse and locations where it took place are related factors. Younger abusers more often resort to penetration in secluded spaces or hideaways. Middle-aged abusers are prone to a greater variety of types and locations of abuse. Much older abusers resort to forms of abuse in the confessional which do not involve bodily contact.

51.8% of those surveyed said that they revealed the abuse later in the period after it had occurred. For 48.2% their taking part in this survey was the first time they described their experiences to someone else.

The abuse was mainly revealed in a family setting (51.7%). Males tend to tell their spouses and friends, females their parents, and mothers in particular. For 54% of cases, it

was only as adults (over 18 years of age) that they told of their experiences, but earlier in the female group. Over time the age at which abuse was revealed has come down.

The reactions of others were to believe the accounts in 56.2% of cases, although this was more likely when the victim was already an adult and female. It is noteworthy that in the period following the abuse there was no external response: for 65.8% of cases, nothing was done to remove the abuser, 77% of the victims never made a complaint to Church people or organisations, and only 4.3% took their cases to court.

In 58.5% of cases, victims mention that they knew of other cases of abuse, although their recollections of these vary considerably in terms of precision and accuracy. In a very rough calculation, we estimate that the 512 victims knew of or were in contact with close to 4,300 other victims.

18. A second stage of the Commission's work involved **multivariate statistical analysis (correspondence analysis, CA)**, through which we sought to identify and describe the patterns of association between places where abuse occurred, types of abuse, characteristics and roles of abusers and characteristics of the victims. The CA enabled us to identify three axes which account for over 80% of the variance in the original variables, albeit we focused on explaining the first two. It also allowed us to design a **spatial map of the abuse**.

**The first (horizontal) axis** accounts for about 53% of the variance and is clearly associated with a contrast between **locales in which the clergy move around on a daily basis** and places which were **hidden away, secluded and isolated or where children slept**. On this axis we typically find situations of abuse which took place in the confessional, in absolute contrast to abuse perpetrated in seminaries, religious boarding schools or refuges, as well as abuse which occurred in places associated with scouts' activities (the national scouts' organisation CNE, camps, etc.). There is a clear correlation between the distribution of types of abuse and the **physical characteristics of these locations**: the axis contrasts the more violent types of abuse like anal and oral sex and masturbation, which take longer and are more difficult to conceal, with the more fleeting albeit no less invasive types which are easier to camouflage, whether they involve touching an erogenous zone or suggestion.

The contrast between these two poles is also related to **the characteristics and status(es) of the abuser(s)**, particularly their **age**: the younger ones (up to age 20) are found alongside the pole for places of refuge, the older ones by the places they frequent daily. It is also related to victims' **gender**. Types of abuse involving some form of physical penetration (anal and oral sex) are typically associated with male gender and secluded spaces, while abuse involving touching erogenous zones or through insinuation are associated with female gender and the locations and trajectories which priests frequent on a daily basis.

**The second axis** accounts for some 21% of the variance. This is an axis which contrasts **situations of abuse in collective spaces open to the community** (the most typical example being Catholic schools), with **situations occurring in private locations** belonging to the abuser (rectories, holiday homes, cars). For abusers, this axis highlights the contrast between situations in which they are consecrated members of religious orders or educators, as in the case of **teachers** or heads of educational

institutions, and those in which the abusers are in charge of **scout** groups. It is important to note that the second axis also clearly contrasts **the ages of the victims**, particularly in the case of boys, with the younger victims being associated with younger abusers, ordained members of religious orders and/or educators, while victims over 14 are associated with scouts and auxiliary members of the clergy.

Behind each number there are lives and concrete experiences which are unique and unrepeatable, despite sharing elements with so many other life stories. Starting out from the locations where abuse took place, we sought to give a voice to the variety of situations found, in terms of gender of victims, the decade in which they occurred and the social and economic inequalities in families of origin. The narratives of these abuses are **in the first person**.

On the basis of the mapping described above, we were able to construct **a gallery of 49 portraits**, built on **seven identified types of locations** where the abuse occurred, relying on the concrete narratives given to the Commission.

19. A **thematic content analysis** was carried out on the responses to the **open questions** in the survey.

Victims were given a voice directly to describe the circumstances involving abuse: how did the abusers approach the victims (what did they say before, during and after the abuse), what were the physical and psychic consequences on victims' relationship with the Church (belief, practice, faith), and what were each victim's opinions on what the Church could do to avoid repetition of what had happened and to repair the damage. The Commission further enquired as to whether victims would like to add any more information and sought to understand why each victim had decided to come forward with their testimony.

It was not easy to listen to, record and read each of these statements. Descriptions were charged with emotional intensity, taking these adults back to their childhood experiences of abuse and recording how it had affected them down to the present day.

It was no less difficult to select examples for submission from among so many potential cases and to organize them into consistent groupings. The criteria adopted ranged from how statistically representative the description in each sample was to the uniqueness and emotional intensity of the testimony, as well as diversity of gender, age, social class, time period and type of abuse, amongst others.

## **20. "Why now did you come forward to give your testimony?"**

The answers provided include the following reasons: the fact that an independent commission had been set up, outside the Church, made up of acknowledged professionals whom the victims felt they could trust;

- news which appeared in the media, especially TV;
- the victim's relationship with the Portuguese Catholic Church, both in terms of "impulsive retaliation" and "an understanding collaboration";
- the direct role of significant others;
- helping others;

- taking part in a scientific study;
- a unique opportunity and an ethical imperative;
- conquering fear, guilt, and the ghosts chasing them, “letting off steam” and “feeling more free”;
- anonymity, and the easy access to the online platform;
- realizing that in the end “they were not the only victim”;
- the result of psychotherapy;
- the death of the abuser or of family members tied to the case;
- only now understanding that what occurred in childhood was sexual abuse.

**21.** Even though our work was focused on the victim, the survey enabled us to “**hear the abuser speaking**”. Addressing the topic of how abusers approached the victims revealed the voice of the abuser, the responder’s narrative bringing it out of the silence. “What did the abuser say in order to abuse you?”

There were many testimonies which recorded various **forms of emotional abuse and maltreatment** of victims before, during and after the sexual abuse itself, contained in the very words which the abuser directed at the victim with a view to facilitating and continuing the sexual abuse; in the silencing of the victim; in the impunity of the aggressor and blaming of the victim, and in the distortion of the victim’s self-image or relationship to themselves; and in the traumatic impact of the abuse when it actually happened, as well as its consequences later.

**22. “What did the abuser say to get close to you?”**

Many interviewees replied “**Nothing**”. While this “nothing” is apparently reductive, it clearly reveals the adult’s perception that he has rights or power over the abused child without the child being entitled to say anything. The “nothing” also demonstrates the child’s silent, uncommunicated proximity, something which the suffering child is also unable to communicate. It is a “nothing” which rests on a structure of power and dominion of the adult over the child.

Other testimonies reveal how the adult tries to create ties to help and support victims and/or their close family, **manipulating** their perception of their various **weaknesses** – emotional, educational, family, financial and spiritual/religious – as the starting point for the abuse. Common too is conveying the idea of the need for “purification”. Other testimonies show how victims are led to engage in certain positively connoted activities (outdoor leisure, holidays) which are transformed into places where abuse occurs, increasing the distortion and confusion already established in the child’s mind. Other narratives emerge in which the approach focuses on the seduction of victims’ personal characteristics, in particular the physical, most often genital or relating to certain secondary sexual characteristics.

There is therefore a climate of anticipation and progression, sometimes with physical threats or coercion, in which abusers take advantage of their proximity to the child and/or its family (often the abuser is “one of ours”) to seduce and subsequently abuse them, and to continue the abuse thereafter.

### 23. “What did they say while the abuse was taking place?”

A recurring theme was that what was happening had a ‘**divine purpose**’ which consequently needed to be fulfilled. With abusers being seen as having a certain symbolic status, and not just divine power but social and cultural importance in certain local contexts, the words used to dominate the child take on the form of **imperatives**, as unquestionable orders and rules: [the abusers] “*told us to do what they wanted*”.

What further emerges from the testimonies is the fact that abusers try to downplay the pathological and criminal aspects of the act itself, **normalizing it** to the child, attributing a false meaning to it or denying that it has occurred, projecting the alleged reasons for it onto others, including the person or the will of God. In other cases the abuse is **imputed to the child**, as being after all its own will, something which the child desires and will value positively in the future. Finally, some testimonies reveal how some abusers cover up their abuse by claiming they are conveying supposedly “scientific” **teachings** related to the human body (e.g. how the sexual organs work).

### 24. “What did they tell you after the abuse had taken place?”

In most cases, victims stressed that after the abuse had occurred they were expressly asked or **ordered to “keep it secret”**, abusers commonly resorting to various forms of blackmail, often by threatening to reveal the child’s behaviour to family members or friends. Contempt and humiliation, making the child feel ridiculous in its always vulnerable relationship with adults, increase victims’ feelings of loneliness and abandonment. Among these testimonies are also situations where abusers oscillate between apparent normality and invitations or orders to repeat the criminal sexual abuse. The testimonies bear witness to an emotional atmosphere of terror and to abusers’ regarding their crimes as mere instances of “**the banality of evil**”.

### 25. “Did they reward or punish you?”

Only a minority of those in the survey sample mention having received a reward or punishment following the abuse, the latter often announced by way of physical or psychological threats to the victim or to close family members regarded as weak links (mother and siblings, for example). Rewards follow certain standard patterns: material benefits for disadvantaged families (food, books, clothes); some “loose coins” or “pocket change”, small amounts of money; cakes or sweets (small treats much sought after by children whose day-to-day life was one of privation); objects related to Catholic religious symbolism itself, such as figures of the saints and medals.

**26.** In 55.9% of cases there are no responses to questions about **the physical consequences of the abuse**, partly because the majority of the situations described do not involve anal sex or full copulation, although the former are more frequent with boys and take place in physically enclosed spaces such as seminaries, boarding schools or refuges.

Almost half of those surveyed state there were no physical consequences, but 21.6% of cases do report them. Most of these turn out to be emotional in origin, and are **psychosomatic**: anxiety and depression involving changes to sleep patterns, eating

habits, body image and sexuality. There are also statements which attest to physical injuries in certain parts of the body, where there was penetration through anal sex or copulation, but most of these were never revealed by the victims.

Information from the sample, from newspaper reports and testimonies of others (e.g.. family members) shows that a large number of cases (7 in total) ended in effective **suicide**.

**27.** In contrast, the vast majority of the victims in this sample confirmed the **psychological impact** of the abuse, describing the intensity of their negative feelings in considerable detail and almost always relating them to permanent damage, that is to say, to ongoing damage over a long period of time right down to the present day, even if the feelings come and go.

The open responses fall into **5 major groups**. The first group encompasses testimonies which stress that those impacts are present, in many ways, with strong and long-lasting symptoms. The second group stresses feelings of fear, guilt, shame, disgust, humiliation, confusion, distrust, insecurity, indignation and loneliness. The third group focuses on feelings of anxiety (anguish and panic, phobias, some obsessive-compulsive disturbances) and fluctuations in temper, with depression and its consequences (for example, stomach upsets, poor sleep, episodes of self-harm and attempts at suicide, with hospitalization). The fourth group stresses the impact on their sex life: the abuse led them to question their sexual orientation, delayed or hindered the development of a sex life with partners and even made it impossible for them to build lasting or gratifying emotional relationships. Many of the victims also mentioned the need they felt to seek specialised support at certain points in their lives, in psychological or psychiatric consultations, with a recurrent need to use pharmaceutical drugs.

In general terms the responses confirm that which is commonly mentioned in bibliographical material on the impact of this type of trauma on both child victims and the adults which they become. **Sexual abuse leaves no child emotionally unaffected**. Its mark is always there, even when the victim denies it through self-control. The suffering which victims go through is not only felt to be serious, but is rarely revealed at the appropriate time, so that the victim is dragged through decades of silence, in many cases down to the present day and with the negative prospect that the suffering will continue into the future.

**28.** As far as the **future relationship with the Church** is concerned, we know that with most of these testimonies the child victims described themselves as persons who in their family and social contexts were religious and practising. For these reasons, and with the abuse being perpetrated by members of the Church, they later developed a “basic mistrust” which persists to this day and in many cases leads them to want to protect subsequent generations of their children and/or grandchildren.

The larger group among these revealed that they cut contact with the Church and partly or entirely ceased to be practising, although they remain Catholic and express their faith by other means. The study shows that the Church lost faithfulness groups as a direct result of child sexual abuse perpetrated by its members. This effect extends to others who while not having been abused themselves, are in sympathy with the suffering of the victims. There is a second group of victims who told of making a distinction between the

abusers and the institution itself, thereby differentiating between the part and the whole and remaining practising Catholics while actively criticizing the Church. There is a final group which cut off all faith and belief and became agnostic or atheist.

### **29. What could the Church do to avoid what happened?**

Nearly all respondents answered this open question. Several suggestions were made, with particular emphasis on the need for the Catholic Church to be aware of, understand and respect the sexuality of the clergy. Most commentary points to the need for training and supervision of its members, by accredited professionals from outside the Church. Many mention the need to do away with compulsory celibacy, respect for freedom of sexual orientation and/or an active sex life, integration and participation of women in religious practice and hierarchy, and the ending of certain forms of contact with believers such as confessions in physically confined spaces.

A significant number expressed opinions pointing to harsher punishment for the aggressors, including compulsory chemical or physical castration, and changes to strengthen the legislation, which they believe to be not only necessary but appropriate: changes to the legal framework, longer sentences and extending the statute of limitations for these crimes.

Finally, there is a set of responses urging faster action by the courts, either under canon or criminal law. A significant body of opinion among responders criticises the length of time it takes to get justice from the courts and have it implemented subsequently: there is a widespread sense that abusers go unpunished or are protected by the Church and by the State itself.

### **30. What could the Church do to make amends for what happened?**

The majority of respondents give a negative answer to this question: **there is no possible reparation to the victims for what happened.** There is however an expectation mentioned in many of the testimonies: the need for psychological and psychiatric help currently and in the future.

The highest percentage of responses mentions a public apology by the Portuguese Catholic Church to the victims of sexual abuse perpetrated by its members. Respondents add to this the desire for a commitment to appropriate future solutions to prevent and act upon abuse.

**31. Interviews** conducted with currently active diocesan bishops (except for one, Beja) and superiors/superiors general of some religious institutes, shifted our in-depth focus from investigation of a large number of victims of sexual abuse when they were children and adolescents to the top of the **institutional hierarchy** in charge of the abusers.

A significant factor emerged immediately in that the volume, intensity and seriousness of signals from the victims found no echo in the testimonies of this elite. Was this a defensive posture against the risk of possible future suspicion and accusations of concealing the problem? Was it an example of clericalism and the priority attributed to defending the institution's reputation above all? These questions remain unanswered.



But there may be another factor in play: at a certain moment in time the setting up of the Commission, the public visibility of the issue, the crescendo of news about cases of “paedophilia in the Church” provided the Church hierarchy with irreversible and irrefutable evidence of the problem.

The following were the questions contained in the script. In what families did these leaders grow up and find their faith? How were their formative years? How do they describe the dioceses they supervise and the work of their congregations? What is their understanding of the significance of the sexual abuse problem in the Portuguese Church? What experience do they have of direct contact with cases of child sexual abuse by lay people or clergy associated with the Portuguese Catholic Church? At the time of their interviews, what did they think of the work of the Commission?

Respondents in this group stated that acknowledgement of the problem of child sexual abuse in the Portuguese Catholic Church is very recent. Their position revealed that the impetus was “from the outside in”, when faced with the widely publicised cases and scandals that occurred, but in hierarchical terms the problem was experienced from “top to bottom”, Pope Francis being credited with the initiative of a deeper acknowledgement of reality.

Despite some differences in degrees of unfamiliarity with the question, both among the bishops and in the comparison of bishops and superiors, at the time of these interviews most of them still apparently denied having had direct experience of the issue, whether during their training or once they were engaged in pastoral activities.

Some of the narratives – but very few – covered the recent emergence of the representation of childhood and its rights and vulnerabilities, and referred to older ways of dealing with events, in which a clericalist attitude denied or responded defensively to the occurrence, leading to effective total paralysis of any ability to acknowledge the problem and deal with it in an appropriate way. There are also references to the practice of belittling the significance of sexual abuse, concealing it, and the expedient of the abuser “moving parish”, which both bishops and superiors explicitly acknowledged.

With regard to the formative period of the male clerical elite, the initial stages of which took place in the time of the *Estado Novo* dictatorship, we may conclude, first, that remarkable individual trajectories of upward social mobility vis-a-vis their families of origin played a crucial role. In addition to the spiritual factors behind the decision to become a priest, it involved studying and obtaining a university degree, a very rare thing among the children of the disadvantaged classes at that time. Secondly, and focusing now on the subjective experience behind such “**unlikely trajectories**”, the interviews seem to point to enormous efforts to contain the intimate life of emotions and affections (both physical and psychic) once interviewees started training in the seminary, as well as to an inability to address the topic and the experience of sexuality in general (their own and that of others) or to recognise that before they became priests, bishops, or other religious person these were all persons, men and women, with their own life experience, view of the other and of a world undergoing abrupt change. A world very different from the world they knew as children, which they experienced in families today described as “traditional”, guided by strong moral principles, being part of small rural communities where the religious values of Catholicism were solid and reflected in the individual and collective gestures and rhythms of everyday life.

**32.** The research in **the archives of the dioceses and religious institutes** identified new cases of child sexual abuse, involving victims and abusers (clergymen and lay people in the service of the Catholic Church). Some of these were identified by the dioceses and religious institutes themselves and others were identified by the GIH. The GIH did not find evidence in the majority of cases of abuse reported to the Commission. This should not be surprising since many of the victims whose testimony was heard by the Commission stated that they did not report the abuse either at the time it occurred or subsequently.

Of the total of suspected cases of sexual abuse identified in the archives, some gave rise to preliminary investigations and administrative criminal proceedings. Various forms of punishment were applied to abusers: some were sent to spiritual retreats, some were removed from their posts, some transferred to another parish, some remained in their parish but under surveillance, and others were defrocked. Only in a very small number of cases was there a trial in the civil courts.

The exponential growth in the number of documented cases from 2010 onwards reflects the implementation of the Guidelines for the Protection of Minors and Vulnerable Persons, which required the dioceses and religious institutes to follow certain defined procedures whenever allegations had been made. Informal, mainly oral methods of dealing with many cases in the twentieth century (the bishop or superior would issue a warning and start surveillance of the abuser) became increasingly unsustainable in the face of social pressure and the increasing visibility of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in the media. Changes in social perceptions of sexual violence, media projection of commissions investigating sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in other countries, and “freeing people to speak out” in movements such as #metoo created an opening for victims to report sexual abuse, including that which had occurred decades earlier.

Some of the post-2010 allegations relate to abuse suffered in previous decades. Until 2010, bishops and superiors of congregation followed certain standard procedures, but the documentation clearly shows that there was very significant room for autonomy in case management. The GIH found references to abuse which was known to the diocesan authority for which there was no documentation relating to possible internal investigations. From 2010 onwards, uniform standard procedures were adopted for dealing with complaints: preliminary investigation, notifying the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, opening of criminal administrative proceedings. However, not even these standard procedures did away with the diversity of ways of implementing the Holy See’s guidelines and the operation of Commissions for the Protection of Minors and Vulnerable Persons – some of which focus more on investigation and others on support for the victims and prevention. These differences naturally make for different outcomes for those who resort to them.

In the preliminary investigations of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, child and adolescent sexual abuse tend to be classified as questions of morality and good manners. The primary motivation of the hierarchies is to protect the Church’s good name, by choosing to cover things up publicly (and possibly issuing warnings internally) and, in cases regard as more serious such as “deflowering”, forcing agreements for the payment of compensation. The prevailing interpretation is that the Catholic Church is the aggrieved party, in cases which are made public, and this leads to antagonising those who do not accept remaining silent. The victim’s suffering is not at the heart of the measures adopted. In investigations in recent years there seems to have been a turnaround. The

research shows less evidence of cover-ups, although attention to the plight of the victim depends to a great extent on which church is involved, together with its respective Commission for the Protection of Minors and Vulnerable Persons.

In closing, a warning. The data on the incidence of sexual abuse uncovered in the ecclesiastical archives must be seen as the “tip of the iceberg”: it was thoroughly demonstrated that an indeterminate number of victims did not report the abuse to the Catholic Church; many of the complaints were dealt with informally, leaving no document trail; there is a strong degree of probability that files may have been purged without following the rules laid down by Canon Law (a conviction shared by many clergymen contacted). To this must be added the ambiguity surrounding much of the twentieth-century church correspondence. It is often the case that the problem of sexual abuse is not mentioned explicitly. The documentation records internal transfers or even a transfer to another country without providing reasons for those transfers, or simply makes vague reference to the need to avoid public scandals. Researchers will look in vain for such evidence. Often they find nothing at all, while sometimes the reports are so ambiguous that they may refer to cases of a different sort such as embezzlement, homosexuality or involvement with adult married women. Faced with this silence of the files, we find ourselves with a Gordian knot. And our efforts at quantification and analysis are irretrievably compromised.

**33.** The Commission’s report concludes with a series of **Final Remarks and Recommendations**, some of which are summarised below.

Child sexual abuse in the Church is a delicate subject which has been little studied in Portugal. It has acquired unprecedented visibility with this study. With secure and independent channels being open to “talk about it”, consistent testimonies arise and can be handled scientifically.

Sexual abuse of children in the Portuguese Catholic Church took place in the past and still exists in the present. **Portugal is not an isolated case**, compared to other countries. The 512 direct victims in this study lead us to at least another 4,300 and, if we reflect that abuse in the vast majority of cases took place on more than one occasion against the same child, to many thousands of instances of abuse. Over time and space we have found a notable diversity of contexts in which abuse occurred. The Commission has uncovered the tips of various icebergs of these occurrences, at various moments and institutional contexts in times past.

**All the types of abuse** described in current Criminal Law were found in the sample, from the least to the most invasive, although the latter were found to be more frequent than the former. In statistical terms, **types of abuse are not randomly distributed**: they depend on the time they occurred, on places/spaces, on victim and victims’ family profiles, and on abuser profiles, in this case nearly all priests of various different age ranges. A map of the abuse was prepared, based on a more sophisticated statistical analysis.

Many of the abusers mentioned are still practising in the Church.

In some circumstances, the abuse was systemic in nature, that is to say, it was anchored in the operating structure of certain institutions of the Church itself. A clericalist attitude, being ignorant of or devaluing the rights of the child, shutting out the eyes of the

outside world - all this ensured that the abuse would continue and that the silencing of the victims would increase. The systemic nature of the abuse does not, however, apply to the whole of the Church, because it reflects the behaviour of a minority of all its members. **Concealment by the abusers themselves was systemic**, as was that of those above them in the hierarchy who had knowledge of their acts.

The work of **the media** in general and of some investigative journalists in particular has been of fundamental importance in disseminating the appeal to “giving a voice to the silenced” and encouraging them to come forward to the Commission with their testimonies. The growing media visibility of the topic over these last few months also undoubtedly helped to raise awareness among many bishops and other members of the Church who seemed still somewhat alienated and far removed from the problem when the Commission started out on its work.

**34.** The Commission made a number of **suggestions and recommendations** which it sees as being important. Some of these are general in scope, others are specific to the Catholic Church, and still others apply to society as a whole.

#### THE CHURCH:

- A new multidisciplinary Commission is proposed, with membership drawn from within and outside the Church, to continue the study and monitor the problem.
- Recognition by the Church of the existence and extent of the problem and a commitment to appropriate measures to prevent it in the future.
- Observance of the “zero tolerance” concept proposed by the Pope
- A moral duty on the part of the Church to denounce cases of alleged crimes of sexual abuse and to collaborate with the Public Prosecutor’s Office in such cases.
- Effective requests for forgiveness of situations which occurred in the past and putting them into practice.
- Ongoing external training and supervision of members of the Church, with specific reference to sexuality (their own and that of children and adolescents)
- Ceasing religious practice and meeting in closed, individual physical locations.
- Effective preventive measures including “best practice manuals” and provision of “support and locales for victims and family members to testify, and corresponding follow-up”
- Ongoing psychological help for past, present and future victims (as a responsibility of the Church and in coordination with the National Health Service - SNS)

#### CIVIL SOCIETY:

- A national study to be carried out on child sexual abuse in the various locations where they are socialised
- Unequivocal recognition of the Rights of the Child
- Empowerment of children and families in relation to the role of the school

- Adjusting the statute of limitations by increasing the upper age limit of the child victim
- Speed in the courts' assessment and response
- Strengthening the role of the media in investigating and dealing with the problem
- Improving emotional literacy in connection with the true development needs of children and young people, especially in the realm of love and sex.