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[English Edition](#)*Clergy sexual abuse*

Leo XIV and the infinite complexity of Papal



Los Angeles
LAS NOTICIAS QUE NO SE VEN EN TU PAÍS **PRESS**



Pope Leo XIV's trips to France in September and Uruguay, Argentina and Peru in November, are anything but slam-dunks about to happen.



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Although French survivors are still willing to engage, talk and propose solutions to Leo XIV, their Argentine colleagues already reject any meeting but those in courtrooms.

The difference in the survivors' attitudes towards Leo XIV reflects the authorities' and bishops' responses to the clergy sexual abuse crisis in each country.

By Rodolfo Soriano-Núñez

One month away from Pope **Leo XIV**'s visit to France, and less than three from his South American tour, the news coming from his future destinations is mixed and, overall, far from encouraging.

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In France, some of the headlines, at least in Catholic media, seem to stick to the script originally developed by **John Paul II** of large gatherings, massive liturgical celebrations, and the display of national and religious symbols that certainly happened during his days in Spain.

In Uruguay, Argentina and Peru, the governments and national conferences of bishops are finalizing the details of the schedule, the gargantuan logistics of these activities, but also dealing already with blowback of different types.

In France, Catholic media displayed already the symbols to be used during the visit, the schedule, and even the names of some of the artists who have been invited to perform for the Pontiff. Last

Saturday, *Le Figaro*, a major French newspaper, devoted its frontpage to the preparation for the visit, with coverage spilling to another three of its 28 pages.

The headline, loosely translated as “Outpouring of support ahead of Pope Leo XIV’s visit to France” ([content in French](#) and behind a paywall) sits well with *Le Figaro*’s understanding of Catholicism in French public life, but it is a bit hard to take at face value when considering two of Pope Prevost’s main challenges during his days there.

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On the one hand, the issue of how he will deal with the effects, disastrous by all accounts, of the many cases of clergy sexual abuse that have marred the Catholic Church’s image in France and elsewhere in Europe and the world.

This series has been following the terrible case at the now former Catholic school of Our Lady of Bétharram (see the story linked below), a now closed facility, in the process of being sold, very close, less than 10 miles or 16 kilometers from the Basilica of Our Lady of Lourdes, in southern France, where some of Pope Prevost’s major activities are already scheduled for his French tour, and where he is supposed to meet, in private, with survivors of clergy sexual abuse.

[English Edition](#)

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Bétharram, a mirror for all countries to look at

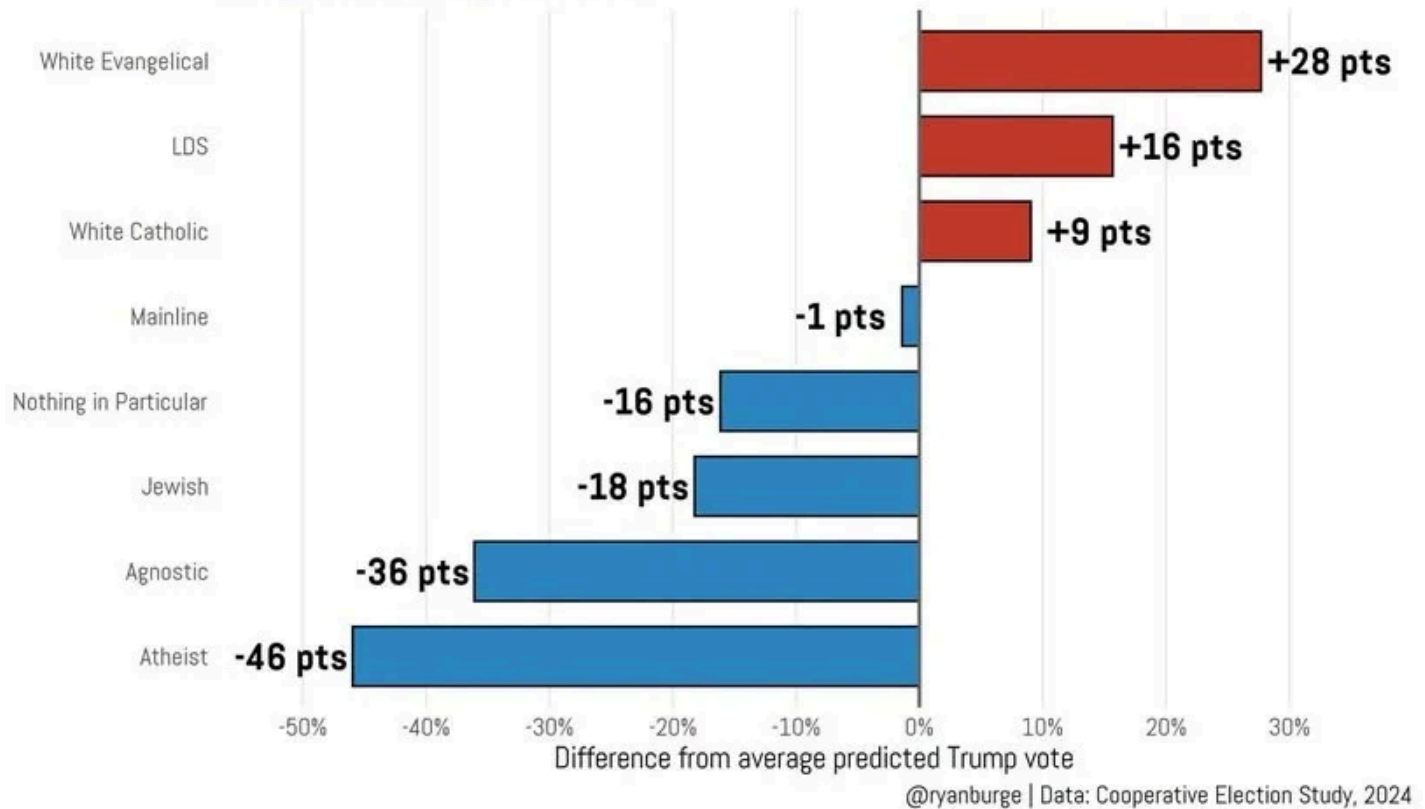
The other, is how willing the ever-shrinking Catholic lay base in Europe and even some of its priests actually are to accept Pope Prevost's take on migration after his recent trip to Spain.

Three months ago, the former bishop of Chiclayo, Peru, was able to seize headlines all over the Global South where he was perceived as an ally of migrants and refugees stranded all over the world, people just like those who had a chance to attend a Pontifical Mass in the Canary Islands, one of the epicenters of the migration crisis in Spain and Europe at large.

However, in the Global North there is no guarantee such perception is accepted even by Catholics. One only needs to look at the recent numbers released by Ryan Burge and the Cooperative Election Study, that has White U.S. Catholics as the third most significant source of support for Donald Trump in the 2024 election, as the graph after this paragraph proves.

Trump Vote by Religious Tradition Among White Validated Voters

Predicted probabilities hold age, gender, education, income, state, and marital status constant
Average predicted Trump vote = 55%



From Ryan Burge's social media.

Even diehard Catholics in the Spanish-speaking world find hard to square Pope Leo XIV's message in the Canary Islands, centered on welcoming the stranger, with what happened on July 30, when newscasts in Madrid and other major European metro areas broadcast images of the massive flow of somewhere between 40 and 60 thousand individuals, most of them Moroccans, into Ceuta, an enclave controlled by Spain even during the days of French occupation of Morocco in the 19th and 20th centuries, and with links to mainland Spain going all the way back to Medieval times.

To put it in perspective, even if there have been similar massive crossings from Morocco to Ceuta, the last time something similar happened was in the last days of the pandemic, and the estimates are roughly one-fifth of the number of migrants crossing the fragile border on the last day of July.

The violence of the images, combined with the less than supportive attitude towards Spain from other members of the European Union, makes hard to believe France could be receptive to a message somehow similar to the one Pope Prevost delivered in the Canary Islands regarding a change of attitude towards migrant populations.

A priest in Ceuta offers in that regard a troublesome example of how fast Leo XIV's message to the Catholic Church in Spain faded. **Jesús Francisco Molina's** statements to local media ([content in Spanish](#)) are the echo of neither Leo XIV's homily in Canary Islands nor Pope **Francis's** last gasp to publicly come forward against **Donald Trump's** policies in the United States in the early days of 2025 (see the story linked after this paragraph).



English Edition

Pope Francis decries US migration policy under Trump

If anything, Molina's words about what the Catholic Church in Ceuta should do, echo **J.D. Vance's** distorted notion of *Ordo Amoris*, the so-called "order of love," that the U.S. Vice President used to attack Pope Francis the same way he recently ignited the fire of conflict with Canada, by insisting on calling that country a "state."

And if the images of large groups of migrants forcefully crossing the rather weak border between Ceuta and Morocco were not enough, there are now even more terrifying images and video, spread over Spanish-language social media, of attacks carried by alleged residents of Ceuta against the camps and tents where the Moroccans live these days.

In the Instagram post linked below, **Clara Carusa**, a citizen of Spain who usually posts about poetry and literature, reacts to the news of the burnings of the camps. Her reaction to that news reflects how hard it is for Spain to deal with this reality.

If you read Spanish or have the automatic translation in your device for Instagram posts, dive into the comments; they offer a non-probabilistic sample of the difficulties Spain and other European countries have when dealing with the many complexities of migration.

As anecdotal as the comments to Carusa's post are, they are aligned with a poll published over the weekend by *El Mundo* ([content in Spanish](#)). The poll has 90 percent of its respondents blaming the government of Morocco for what that and other media in Spain and Europe call "an invasion."

A French autumn

Besides those two major challenges Leo XIV will confront during his days in France, one would expect he has been briefed about the political and societal context in which his trip will happen.

Available French polling shows strong support for the most anti-migrant brand of politics, led by **Marine Le Pen**, who holds what seems to be a definitive advantage to become the first woman elected President, unless something unexpected happens in the next months.

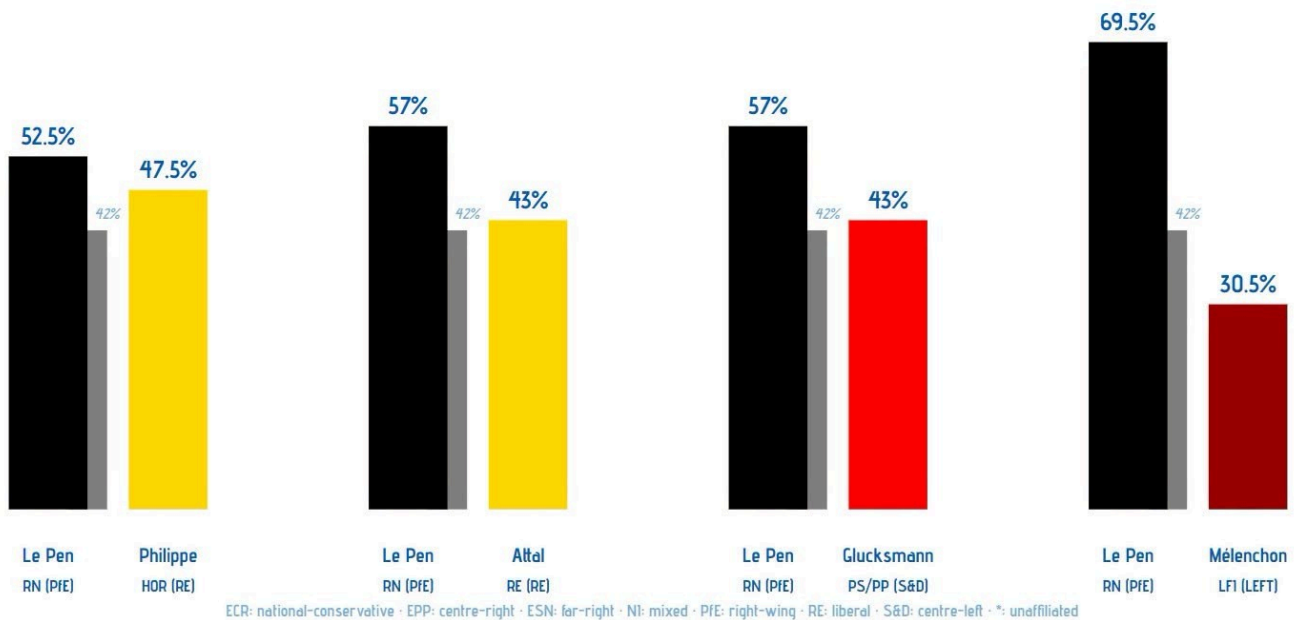
The graph after this paragraph has the most recent polling data available, published on Sunday, of a hypothetical presidential election run-off with Marine Le Pen winning against any of her potential rivals in the election which, if required, is scheduled to happen on May 2, 2027. More data about the poll is [available here](#) on *Europe Elects*' Facebook profile.



France (Presidential run-off election)

Elabe poll for BFM TV and La Tribune Dimanche · 26-28 August 2026 · 1,501 respondents

Polling result
2022 election result
Next election:
2 May 2027
© 2026 EuropeElects



From Europe Elects social media.

In that regard, Le Pen seems poised to win the election, despite her known sympathy for **Vladimir Putin**, her disdain for the European Union, to name only two of the most notorious red flags that, if one believes what the French polling is saying these days, are irrelevant for the average French citizen tired of the inability of their leaders to actually address key issues.

One hopes, in that regard, that whatever message Leo XIV is articulating for France, he keeps in mind how, already in 2023, when Pope Francis made his own trip to France, he made a call, consistent with his and Leo XIV's take on migration, with little or no impact in the overall attitude towards migrants and deeply affected by the behavior of the Catholic leadership in Marseille, the city chosen by Francis to visit.

Even if Marseille is by all accounts a city which, by Latin American standards is a "law and order" paradise, by French and European ones, is the site of a series of major disruptions, as its maritime hub serves as the primary port of entry for illegal drugs getting there from Mexico. Marseille is, in that respect, one of the European metropolitan zones where the negative effects of migration are most visible, and if that was not enough the epicenter of a series of major cases of clergy sexual abuse.

Even if the Mexican cartels only deliver the merchandise and, as far as it is possible to tell, they are not directly involved in distribution there, echoes of the drug-related violence that has disrupted Mexican public life over the last three decades, are visible in the streets of Marseille, the theater of frequent confrontations between the *DZ Mafia* and the *Yoda Network*.

As it happens in many Mexican cities, Marseille teens are increasingly becoming targets of systematic recruitment by those two mobs, and their ever-present rivals. Since many of those kids come from marginalized and migrant communities, it is not hard to imagine how their involvement is framed in French legacy and social media.

Granted, Cardinal **Jean-Marc Aveline**, the Archbishop of Marseille and president of the French Conference of Catholic Bishops is an affable figure, able to get his way in civil media. Some would even call him charismatic, a man who was more than willing to support Pope Francis's take on migration, a champion of the rights of minorities and marginalized populations, who has also made a name for himself through his many "mistakes" when dealing with clergy sexual abuse accusations against clergy under his supervision.

So many that it is unavoidable to question if there are actually "mistakes" or if that many "mistakes" are actually a pattern to conceal clergy sexual abuse, and to make it harder for authorities and the Catholic Church itself to address the underlying issues.

The situation is so bad that French observers of the clergy sexual abuse crisis talk about at least two clear patterns emerging from Marseille itself and its so-called suffragan dioceses, those of Aix-Arles, Ajaccio, Avignon, Digne, Fréjus-Toulon, Gap-Embrun and Nice. On the one hand, there is a pattern widely documented in French national and regional media of systematic cover ups of local priests, including but not limited to **Charles Sighieri**.



English Edition

The trouble with Catholic movements: the visitation to the Emmanuel

On the other, there is the issue of Cardinal Aveline's unwillingness to acknowledge the multiple accusations raised against **Jean-Michel di Falco**, the emeritus bishop of Gap-Embrun. Back in November 2025, the story linked before this paragraph offered more details about the many issues affecting Cardinal Aveline's tenure in Marseille. As stated there, the situation is so convoluted that there is an active movement asking for Aveline's removal from office, as the story from a French local media linked after this paragraph told back in September of 2025.

Faisons
Parler
Marseille

Faisons parler Marseille
about 12 months ago





● Un collectif marseillais a officiellement adressé au Pape Léon XIV une demande de démission de l'archevêque de [#Marseille](#), Monseigneur Jean-Marc [#Aveline](#).

Les membres de ce collectif pour la défense de l'église Saint-Maurice dénoncent la fermeture et la cession de plusieurs paroisses, qu'ils jugent menées sans respect des fidèles ni transparence. Ils pointent également une gestion jugée opaque de certains dossiers sensibles. Pour eux, la crise de confiance est telle qu'un changement de gouvernance est devenu indispensable.

La lettre a été transmise à la rédaction de Tribune Chrétienne.

15

8

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To make matters worse, it is necessary to keep in mind Aveline would be a major player during Leo XIV's visit to France, as he remains the president of the French Conference of Bishops, and as such is the primary host of the upcoming visit.

In that regard, as it also happens in the United States and elsewhere in the Global North, the Catholic Church confronts the fact that there is no amount of advocacy for migrants and other marginalized groups able to compensate for its own mishandling of the clergy sexual abuse crisis.

There are already signs of that in the United States, where the Catholic Church has been for the last century or so a major player in shaping the so called "melting pot," as the parishes, chapels, hospitals and schools played a major role to integrate migrants, from the early waves of Irish refugees of the Famine, all the way to the most recent arrivals of Latin Americans fleeing political and economic instability as much as cartel and gang-related violence in their countries of origin.

If that was not enough, it is clear that the Le Pen family has never been perceived as particularly loyal to Rome's teachings ever since **Jean-Marie**, the now deceased patriarch of the clan, was more than willing to legitimize **Marcel Lefebvre's** systematic attacks on Paul VI and John Paul II.

To make matters worse, even if the inauguration of the final stage of the Holy Family in Barcelona moved the hearts and imagination of Catholic faithful and architecture enthusiasts all over the world, the way the Vatican handled the meeting with survivors of clergy sexual abuse in Madrid was less than stellar.

As such, it is now a hotly debated issue in France, where the many collectives of survivors wonder what will happen in southern France, the Catholic heartland, while there are already the first reactions to Leo XIV's visit coming from Argentina, one of the three Latin American countries on his early November trip.

More so as recently, French and Argentine media published details of an Argentine priest with standing accusations of clergy sexual abuse serving at the Basilica of Our Lady of Lourdes—the exact site where Pope Leo is scheduled to meet the French Conference of Bishops. While a meeting with abuse survivors may take place, if his visit to Spain provides any blueprint, it will remain unlisted, unrecorded in the official schedule, and kept out of the public record.

That calculated defensive posture—seeking plausible deniability to avoid institutional fallout—is a far cry from Philadelphia in 2015, where Pope Francis was willing to face victims directly, take public ownership, and attempt to right a wrong on the record, as documented by the story linked after this paragraph when comparing how Rome managed the 2015 meeting with victims in Philadelphia, to what happened in Madrid in 2026.



English Edition

Leo XIV in Spain: The Catholic Church's many paradoxes

A South American spring?

Ever since **Paul VI**'s 1968 apotheotic trip to Colombia, in the Vatican, trips to Latin America were perceived as chances to "flex their muscles." After John Paul II's visit to Mexico, back in 1979, planning a Pope's travel to Latin America was seen as a slam-dunk. Even during Popes **Benedict XVI** and Francis's visits to Mexico, the United States and Mexico in 2012, 2015 and 2016, respectively, the idea that a Pontiff was able to gather large crowds on this side of the Atlantic was almost a given.



Visita de Papa Pablo VI a Colombia (Teleayer, 1968)

Señal Memoria

RTVC is funded in whole or in part
by the Colombian government.



Watch on

A Colombian public TV video from Paul VI's 1968 trip. Audio available only in Spanish. Auto-dubbed track in English available over YouTube's control panel.

All that ended when Pope Francis set foot, back in late January 2018, in Santiago de Chile. Even if there were people willing to show their yellow and white colors, the streets of Santiago and many other Chilean cities lacked the buoyant and cheerful crowds, willing to stand in line just to have a chance to see the visiting Pontiff.

At the time, there were all kinds of excuses to explain the empty venues and streets. Pope Francis was even willing to break away from protocol, and accepted an "impromptu" interview with Argentine media minutes before one of his activities there.



Two volunteers after one of Pope Francis's public activities during his January 2018 trip to Chile. Notice the aprons with the white and yellow colors. Opus Dei social media.

Tellingly, far from acknowledging the many mistakes made by his church when handling the accusations against **Fernando Karadima** and the group of four bishops he had been able to promote to such a position, he was willing to stick his head out for the then bishop of Osorno, the former military bishop of the country and, by all accounts, a key piece in Karadima's large-scale predatory practices in one of Santiago's most exclusive neighborhoods: Providencia.

It is still unclear what moved Pope Francis to make an adamant defense of Juan de la Cruz Barros Madrid. The fact is that the next day, Cardinal **Seán O'Malley**, the now emeritus archbishop of Boston and emeritus president of *Tutela Minorum*, saw the need to leave Boston and catch **Jorge Mario Bergoglio** in Lima to talk with him about the implications of his interview with Argentine TV.

As a consequence, Francis backpedaled his adamant defense of Barros Madrid. A few weeks later, he would ask the entire Chilean Conference of Bishops to meet him in Rome, where he asked for their resignations. Even when they complied, in many cases the resignation was never made effective.

To name the most glaring example of it, Cardinal **Fernando Chomalí Garib** was at the time the Archbishop of Concepción, but his resignation was never actually accepted and, after Barros Madrid's early resignation, Chomalí Garib was appointed as apostolic administrator of Osorno, and then he was promoted to Archbishop of Santiago de Chile in 2023.

What is worse, already since his days in Concepción and Osorno, Chomalí Garib earned a reputation for being less than willing to acknowledge the grievances and criticism of survivors of clergy sexual abuse. He reluctantly took over Osorno as apostolic administrator from Barros Madrid, despite the accusations raised at the time against Barros by many of Karadima's victims.

In his mind, Pope Francis's change of heart after his meeting with Cardinal O'Malley should be more than enough, and whoever is unwilling to abide by his rationale, is blocked by him on social media.

The chances that there will be large crowds in Uruguay and Argentina to cheer and greet Pope Prevost are, in that respect, lower than the odds Pope Bergoglio faced during his 2018 trip to Chile and Peru.

Not only is whatever was left of Uruguay as a Catholic nation a ghost of a distant past, but the chances that something similar could happen during Prevost's austral spring days in Buenos Aires are rather high.



English Edition

Latin American Catholics lose trust, is sexual abuse the culprit?

Three documents

Unlike what happens in Europe, where the Catholic Church seems to be unable to actually “move the needle” when dealing with the effects of migration, in Latin America, one needs to look at the effects of the many cases of clergy sexual abuse as it happened back in 2018 in Chile, to find one of the potential culprits of the loss of trust in Catholic leadership that explains the emptying of the pews and, potentially, the feeble response to public, massive, displays of faith that in Argentina, at least, will be affected by more shades of complexity.

One only needs to compare how the survivors of clergy sexual abuse from France tackle Pope Prevost's visit to their country as an opportunity to engage in dialogue and solve the many pending issues, with how the Argentine survivors of the same scourge outright reject any communication with Leo XIV during his days in Argentina.

English and Spanish after French original | Inglés y español despu

Lettre ouverte au Pape Léon de la part de victimes d'abus sexuels dans l'Église

Monsieur le chef de l'église catholique,

Ne serait-il pas admirable que votre voyage en France reste dans l'histoire comme le moment où toutes les victimes dans tous les pays et reconnaisse la culpabilité de l'Église ? Jamais auparavant à nous les survivants en tant que groupe, réparti dans le monde entier.

Les violences sexuelles dans l'Église catholique n'ont jamais été une exception, mais un fait et il est à craindre que ces pratiques y sévissent encore.

Il serait encore plus fort que vous entriez dans l'histoire comme le premier pape à protéger les auteurs.

Nous aimerions faire quelques propositions concrètes :

- Donner un mandat à tous vos évêques, pour lancer des initiatives approfondies sur les crimes passés et présents. En effet, ils nous disent qu'ils ne peuvent rien faire par eux-mêmes.
- Renforcer la prévention en éduquant et en formant l'ensemble du clergé afin que les auteurs soient encouragés à parler librement. Le pourcentage de celles qui osent parler est encore bien trop faible aujourd'hui.
- Introduire un système universel de réparations, garanti et mis en œuvre par un organe indépendant de l'Église. Il vous faut d'ores et déjà renoncer à être juge et partie. Reconnaissance et Réparation est un exemple.
- Ouvrir et rendre public toutes les archives de cas de pédocriminalité, à la simple demande dans le monde.
- Établir un site commémoratif dédié à toutes les victimes dans un lieu accessible :

Cordialement,

Premières signatures de survivants :

Bruno Tackels

Jean Marc Turine

Benoît Polack

Damien de Wispelaere

English and Spanish after French original | Inglés y español después del original

Open Letter to Pope Leo from Victims of Sexual Abuse in the Church

To the Head of the Catholic Church,

Would it not be admirable if your trip to France went down in history as the decisive moment when the Pope acknowledged the guilt of the Church? Never before have you addressed a worldwide group.

Sexual violence in the Catholic Church has never been an exception, but a widespread fact. And even if these practices are still raging.

It would be even more powerful if you entered history as the first Pope to protect victims and punish perpetrators.

We would like to make a few concrete proposals:

- Give a mandate to all your bishops, to launch in-depth initiatives in their dioceses. Indeed, they tell us that they can do nothing because it is the Pope alone who decides.
- Strengthen prevention by educating and training all clergy so that victims, witnesses and bystanders can speak freely. The percentage of those who dare to testify and file complaints is very low.
- Introduce a universal system of reparations, guaranteed and implemented by a body independent of the Catholic Church. You must already renounce being both judge and party. The Commission for Recognition and Reparation (in France) is one example.
- Open and make public all archives of pedocriminality cases, upon simple request.
- Dedicate a memorial site to all victims in an accessible location in Saint Peter's Square.

Cordially,

First signatures of survivors:

Bruno Tackels

Jean Marc Turine

Benoît Polack

Damien de Wispelaere

As translated by Rodolfo Soriano-Núñez | Traducido por Rodolfo Soriano-Núñez

English and Spanish after French original | Inglés y español después del original francés

Carta abierta al papa León de parte de víctimas de abusos sexuales en la Iglesia

Señor jefe de la Iglesia Católica:

¿No sería admirable que su viaje a Francia pase a la historia como el momento decisivo en el que el papa reconoce a las víctimas en todos los países y reconozca la culpabilidad de la Iglesia? Nunca ante **sobrevivientes**, como un grupo presente en todo el mundo.

La violación es de te.

Page 2 / 3

No una excepción, sino un comportamiento

Letter from the French survivors to Pope Leo XIV. English after French original.

The letter from French survivors appears above this paragraph as a PDF in French, English and Spanish (original [available here over Facebook](#)), while the statement from the Argentine survivors appears in both Spanish and English after this paragraph (original [available here over Facebook](#)).

Statement from the Argentine survivors. English after Spanish original.

The differences that exist in both documents are not a reflection of the personalities of their authors and signatories, but of their experiences. While the French survivors can appeal to the experience of the Commission for Recognition and Reparation, there is nothing similar in Argentina.

Quite the opposite. As several stories published by this series over the years have proved, despite the position held for over twelve years in Rome by **Jorge Mario Bergoglio**, the former Archbishop of Buenos Aires, his influence helped predators evade Argentine justice and, as it happens all over Latin America, most Catholic bishops in Argentina still do their best to protect predators while chastising and even destroying the lives and reputations of survivors.

English Edition

Seven stories of clergy sexual abuse

One only needs to review **Julio César Grassi**'s case, the first in the "Seven stories of clergy sexual abuse" installment from 2024, linked above, to understand the wall of institutional resistance

survivors confront in Argentina.

English Edition

Matías, Argentine survivor key to jail a bishop and a priest

The same pattern is evident in **Kevin Matías Montes**'s story, linked above, a survivor of abuse as a seminarian in Argentina already in the 21st century, or in **Hernán René Rausch**'s 30-year search for justice. Rausch is now appealing to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights as a last resort, after Argentine judges enforced statutes of limitations to protect a defrocked former priest, as reported in the story linked below.

English Edition

Scent of a predator: memory and why abuse should never prescribe

Those three cases from Argentina are anything but anomalies. Both Montes and Rausch belong to larger groups attacked by predators in their dioceses of origin and Grassi was the Argentine Catholic Church poster boy for social engagement in the 1990s and 2000s, with an active presence in media and the then emerging internet that ultimately were nothing but a convoluted cover up for his abusive practices with minors under his care.

The endorsement of the Argentine survivors' statement by other Latin American networks should warn Vatican bureaucrats about the exhaustion of a model of dismissive engagement with survivors and the overall absence of actual solutions. Even if it makes sense to put a premium on prevention, the fact is that new cases are still happening. And if one goes from South America all the way west, to reach New Zealand, the sad song remains the same.

On Saturday, *SNAP Aotearoa*, the local network of survivors published a disheartening statement reflective of the devastating effects the Catholic Church's defense strategy has on the survivors and how the recent emphasis on listening, prevention and safeguarding falls short of offering any actual solution to real pressing issues affecting them or their friends and relatives. Their statement is available as a PDF after this paragraph or [here at Facebook](#).

What is worse, it is hard to imagine an issue so similar across countries and cultures as different as France, Argentina and New Zealand where the victims' claims are almost indistinguishable from each other.

As the visits to France, Uruguay, Argentina and Peru come closer, this series will continue to cast light on the visits as such, but also on the difficulty of portraying papal trips, with private meetings with handpicked survivors, as easy fixes for the many cases shaping a crisis such as this.

English Edition

Latin American Catholicism, decades of loss

Pope Francis and then-President Michelle Bachelet during the final day of his trip to Chile, January 18, 2018. Social media of the Regional Government of Tarapacá, Chile.

* * *

A summary of this piece is available as audio after this paragraph.

0:00 / 6:10

Note on production: The text of this summary was written and edited solely by the author. The delivery of the audio summary was achieved using a high-quality, text-to-speech engine Microsoft Word for Web. The AI was used for voice generation only, not content creation.

Tags

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