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Dutch bishops, religious approve sex abuse inquiry

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UTRECHT, Netherlands -- The Dutch bishops' conference and the conference of Dutch religious have approved a "broad external and independent inquiry" into cases of clerical sexual abuse and how they were handled by the church.

The two conferences issued a joint press statement May 11 saying the number of abuse cases reported to a church-sponsored victims' assistance office since February "necessitates a thorough investigation."

The bishops and religious superiors "reaffirm that they strongly condemn any form of sexual abuse. Abuse is contrary to the Gospel and the dignity of the human person," the statement said.

"To those who were victims of abuse within the Catholic Church, the religious superiors and bishops reiterate their deepest sorrow and apologies," the statement said.

Since February, more than 1,500 people have contacted the victims' assistance hotline and more than 50 formal complaints have been filed; the bishops and religious urged "victims who have not yet reported" to contact the police and-or the hotline.

The Dutch church leaders asked the staff of the hotline to advise them on what the church can and should do immediately to improve assistance to victims, but they also said that a longer, more complex investigation is needed to determine the scale of abuse, potential causes of abuse and to examine the way accusations were handled.

The bishops' conference and the conference of religious pledged their full cooperation with the investigation, which they said must be transparent, independent and scientific.

"Independence and transparency are exactly what the victims have a right to expect and are indispensable in the church's effort to help victims and prevent future abuse effectively," the statement said.

The statement did not give a timeline for the investigation.

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