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FILE - Washington Attorney General Bob Ferguson is seen, April 27, 2023, at the University of Washington's Hans Rosling Center for Population Health in Seattle. The Catholic church is refusing to cooperate with a Washington state investigation into whether it unlawfully used charitable trust funds to cover up sexual abuse by priests, Attorney General Ferguson said Thursday, May 9, 2024, and he asked a court to force the Seattle Archdiocese to turn over decades of records. (AP/Lindsey Wasson)

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The Catholic church is refusing to cooperate with a Washington state investigation into whether it unlawfully used charitable trust funds to cover up sexual abuse by priests, Attorney General Bob Ferguson said Thursday, asking a court to force the Seattle Archdiocese to turn over decades of records.

The archdiocese called the allegations a surprise, saying in a statement that it welcomed the investigation and has been collaborating since receiving a subpoena last July. The archdiocese shares the state's goals — "preventing abuse and helping victim survivors on their path to healing and peace," it said.

"We have a good understanding of the content of our files and we have no concern about sharing them with the Attorney General lawfully and fairly," the statement said.

Ferguson, a Catholic himself, told a news conference that the archdiocese has refused to provide even a single document that had not already been made public, claiming an exemption as a religious institution. The archdiocese disputed that as well, saying it offered this week to provide private deposition documents, but that the attorney general's office said it wasn't interested.

Ferguson said the archdiocese ignored a second subpoena issued this spring seeking records on how the church handled allegations of sex abuse, including financial records related to how it may have spent charitable trust money moving priests from parish to parish after they were accused of sex abuse.

"The church has more information than it has shared with the public," Ferguson said. "We believe the public is entitled to see those records."

Some 23 states have conducted investigations of the Catholic church, and so far at least nine have issued reports detailing their findings. In some cases, those findings have gone far beyond what church officials had voluntarily disclosed.

For example, the six Catholic dioceses in Illinois had reported publicly that there had been 103 clerics and religious brothers credibly accused of child sex abuse. But in a scathing report last year, the Illinois attorney general's office said it had uncovered detailed information on 451 who had sexually abused at least 1,997 children.

Similarly, Maryland last year reported staggering evidence of just how widespread the abuse was: More than 150 Catholic priests and others associated with the Archdiocese of Baltimore sexually abused over 600 children and often escaped accountability. In 2018, a Pennsylvania grand jury found that more than 300 Catholic clerics had abused more than 1,000 children in that state over the prior 70 years.

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The Seattle Archdiocese has published a list of 83 clerics it says were credibly accused, and it says that beginning in the 1980s it was one of the first in the nation to begin adopting policies to address and prevent sexual abuse by priests. Sexual abuse by church personnel peaked in 1975, and there have been no reports since 2007, the archdiocese said.

But despite decades of lawsuits by survivors of clerical sex abuse, the extent of the scandal in Washington state remains unknown, Ferguson said, because the church has not released its files or explained why it found allegations against other priests less than credible.

Accusers, who have long demanded that the church open its books, welcomed Ferguson's announcement and said they regretted its necessity. Transparency is essential for the church to heal, said Terry Carroll, a member of the steering committee at Heal Our Church, a Catholic church reform organization in Washington.

"We call on the church and its legal representatives to cooperate fully with the investigation by granting full access to all relevant records, including internal chancellery memos, attorneys correspondence and financial information," Carroll said during the news conference Thursday. "Church members and survivors deserve no less."

Ferguson's investigation is civil, not criminal, and focuses on the three dioceses in Washington — Seattle, Spokane and Yakima. He said the Spokane and Yakima dioceses have refused to provide documents, but the attorney general's office is not

yet seeking court orders to force them to comply.