

## Vatican Sex abuse summit 21-24 February 2019

### OVERVIEW

The Vatican will host a summit on the Protection of Minors in the Church from 21 to 24 February. It's a response to the avalanche of sexual abuse allegations and revelations that have continued to plague the Roman Catholic Church. Pope Francis plans to attend the four-day summit, with the senior archbishops who lead the Church in individual countries. More details will be revealed a few days before the summit begins, but so far the Vatican has said that, as well as working groups and plenary sessions, participants will also hear testimonials from abuse survivors.

### WHY IS THE SUMMIT HAPPENING NOW?

Scandals involving sexual abuse of power between the clergy and laypeople are not new; the Church has been publicly struggling with the issue for nearly two decades, and accusations of abuse go back even further. Pope Francis, who was elected in 2013, has promised to get to grips with the situation, and many Catholics have been hoping that he will carry out the kind of root-and-branch reform that will punish the abusers, protect the vulnerable and put effective safeguards in place. In August last year he wrote an open letter to the world's 1.3 billion Catholics, acknowledging the failures of the Church and promising zero tolerance for abusers. The next month, the Vatican announced that the summit looking into abuse would be held. Supporters of the Pope hope it will emphasise how importantly Francis takes this issue; but some critics have said it may just be a talking shop designed to protect him from some of his own mistakes.

### MOUNTING PRESSURE

Several scandals have come to light during Francis's pontificate, though many of them relate to events that occurred under previous popes. His defenders say Francis is unfairly shouldering a burden that should have been tackled by his predecessors, Benedict and John Paul II. These include:

- The Chilean church: police are investigating numerous allegations, going back decades, of sexual [abuse](#) of minors by clergy. Church property has been raided. All 31 serving bishops offered to resign, as well as three who had retired. The resignations of seven were accepted and two bishops were defrocked by the Pope. Francis was also criticised, after initially defending a friend, Bishop Juan Barros, who was alleged to have covered up abuse by another cleric. After an investigation, the Pope apologised. Barros was among those who resigned.
- The US church: the Church in North America has been plagued by revelations of widespread abuse of minors, which first came to a head in 1985. Most recently, a Pennsylvania grand jury report found that 300 priests had abused more than 1,000 children since the 1940s and that a string of bishops in six dioceses covered up for them, including the Archbishop of Washington, Cardinal Donald Wuerl. He resigned in October, 2018.
- Religious communities: although individual communities of brothers and nuns have sometimes been implicated in abuse scandals, in February this year Pope Francis revealed that some [nuns](#) had been abused by male clergy. However, the Vatican has indicated that the summit would deal only with abuse against children and vulnerable adults.

- Archbishop Zanchetta: Argentine Bishop Gustavo Oscar Zanchetta faces allegations of sexual coercion and misconduct involving seminarians. But there are suggestions that Pope Francis knew of these allegations two years before he appointed Zanchetta to a position in Rome, after he had already resigned as head of his Argentine diocese.
- The UK church: in August 2018 the Independent Inquiry into Child Sex Abuse found that “appalling sexual abuse [was] inflicted over decades on children” at two large fee-paying Catholic schools: Ampleforth in North Yorkshire and Downside in Somerset. In February 2019, [Dom Martin Shipperlee](#), the Abbot of Ealing Abbey, resigned his post over revelations of sex abuse at St Benedict’s School in west London. Shipperlee admitted he had not done enough to safeguard pupils. Two teachers and monks at the school have been jailed for sexual abuse.

### ARCHBISHOP VIGANO

Apart from the continuing revelations from national churches, Pope Francis has also had to deal with a personal attack from a senior cleric. Archbishop Carlo Viganò alleged in an open letter that Pope Francis knowingly rehabilitated a known abuser, Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, who was allegedly stripped of his responsibilities by Francis’s predecessor, Pope Benedict. Francis [refused](#) to address the allegation directly. Critics say he has serious questions to answer: his supporters say that Viganò’s central allegation lacks credibility, and is disproved by contemporary evidence. On 16 February 2019, the Vatican said a canonical process had [convicted](#) McCarrick of two charges: soliciting sex during confession, and committing “sins” with minors and adults, “with the aggravating factor of the abuse of power”. He was defrocked. Earlier, in November 2018, the US Catholic bishops were on the verge of voting on a new set of proposals to tackle abuse – but they were ordered to stop by the Vatican, so that the issues could be dealt with globally at February’s summit.

### EXPECTATIONS

Since the initial announcement regarding the summit, the Vatican has moved to downplay expectations of what it will achieve. In January the Pope said he “perceived inflated expectations”. He went on to say that the goal was to make bishops aware of the problem and to share roles and responsibilities, and share set of protocols. Will that be enough to placate critics and victims, and reassure ordinary Catholics?