



Transparency Commission

Executive Summary

Assessment of Institutional Response

in cases of sexual abuse
of minors and vulnerable
individuals

Purpose and scope

The assessment carried out by the Transparency Commission is structured around two analytical sets built from the documentation provided by the Archdiocese. The distinction is strictly methodological: it allows the scope of the conclusions to be matched to the nature of the evidence available in each area of assessment.

The **Global Set (37 complaints)** comprises all the complaints for which documentary evidence was found in the archives to which the Commission had physical access—the Archbishop’s secret (reserved access) archive and the archives of the Judicial Vicar and of the Ecclesiastical Tribunal—regardless of whether or not they met the requirements to form part of the specific object of the assessment. It constitutes the documentary basis of the investigation and makes it possible to reconstruct the general context of the institutional response. The clinical and sociocultural analyses, as well as certain documentary analyses, draw on it, wholly or in part, where necessary to understand the forms of reception, listening, accompaniment and case management reflected in the files. The 37 complaints correspond to the documentary evidence found in the archives consulted; this figure is not an estimate of the prevalence of the sexual abuse of minors, nor does it rule out the existence of situations that left no documentary record.

The **Assessment Set (24 cases)** comprises the case files that make it possible to evaluate the Archdiocese’s actions in accordance with the object of this report. It results from applying four cumulative criteria—territory under the jurisdiction of the Archdiocese, the period 2001–2025, the nature of the reported acts, and the status of the alleged victim as a minor or vulnerable person—together with a cautious inclusion criterion: where there were significant documentary gaps, the file was not excluded unless the evidence allowed the reasonable conclusion that it fell outside the scope of the investigation. This prevents shortcomings in the archive from artificially narrowing the scope of the assessment. Of the 37 complaints in the Global Set, 29 concerned acts that occurred within the territory of the Archdiocese—7 corresponded to other Panamanian dioceses, and in one case it was not possible to establish the location; of those 29, 5 fell outside the material, temporal or personal scope of the report, leaving an Assessment Set of 24 cases, which forms the basis for the institutional conclusions set out in the following chapters.



The methodological details of the analytical pillars of this report—a framework of transitional and restorative justice—its multidisciplinary approach, sources and limitations, and the definition of both sets are detailed universes are set out in Chapter III dedicated to the methodology.

The assessment carried out by this Commission was not funded by the Archdiocese, but sponsored by Notre Dame Law School and by Villanueva University and its Foundation, an additional guarantee of its independence.

Key findings

(what is on record)

The Commission identified 37 complaints with documentary evidence. In 24 of them, the Archdiocese of Panama bore an quantifiable assessable institutional responsibility between 2001 and 2025. All the assessments in this report refer to those 24 cases. The remaining 13 either correspond to other dioceses (7); fall outside the object of the report because of their subject matter, time period or the status of the victim (5); or lack the data needed to place them (1).

1

The documentation exists, but it does not allow the procedures to be reconstructed.

The case files show that complaints were presented, investigations were opened and decisions were made. But traceability is lost as the processes advance. The year of the complaint is recorded in only 20 of the 24 files, and the identity of the victim in only 16. The opening of the preliminary investigation is documented only, in 7 cases and the final decision is recorded in only 2 cases. Notification of the decision to the parties is recorded in none of the examined cases. The Commission stresses that the absence of a record does not allow the conclusion that the action was not taken, but it does prevent it from being verified. It also necessarily prevents the Archdiocese from demonstrating what it did.^[1]

2

In most cases, victims came forward on their own initiative

Of the 20 complaints for which the identity of the victim is recorded, 13 (65%) were filed directly by the person affected, 6 came through family members or third parties, and one (5%) was anonymous. In none of the 24 cases is there a record of action initiated ex officio.

3

Care for the victim is the least documented dimension.

Until December 2019, the pontifical secret severely limited the information a victim could receive about their case. Since 2019, however, canon law has prohibited imposing silence on victims and has provided for keeping them informed of the proceedings. Of the 24 cases, information to the victim about the process and their rights is recorded in only 3. Only 4 cases record the naming of a liaison between the Archdiocese and the victim. Specialized accompaniment, genuine access to information about the process and participation in its stages, is found in only 1. No file records an assessment of harm, the adoption of reparation measures—2 expressly state that there were none—or verification of their implementation.

4

The relationship with civil justice cannot be traced

A report to State authorities is recorded in 2 files, and it is expressly recorded that there was none in another 4. In the remaining 18 cases, there is no information which would allow the Archdiocese's actions in this regard to be assessed. The requirement of such cooperation with civil justice has been gradually formalized through legislation in both spheres.

^[1]Three variables should be distinguished and not confused: whether the victim's identity is recorded (16 of 24), whether the victim was actually heard or interviewed during the procedure (2), and whether they were informed about the process and their rights (3). It is one thing for the case file to identify the victim; it is another for the victim to have been cared for.



5

The institutional response changes from 2015 onwards.

In that year, Guidelines *Protegiendo Nuestros Tesoros. Líneas Guía de la Iglesia Católica en Panamá para la Protección de Menores* (Protecting Our Treasures: Guidelines of the Catholic Church in Panama for the Protection of Minors) is approved and put into action. In 2023, the Archdiocese began its own review that culminated in 2024 in the creation of the Pastoral Office for Care and Prevention and the Listening Office. This is also the period in which the largest number of complaints is concentrated: 9 of the 20 cases with a recorded year (45%) date from the last five years. While the Commission cannot establish a causal relationship, it can note the temporal coincidence between the creation of accessible reporting channels and the increase in recorded complaints.

6

Institutional capacities are advancing unevenly.

The Commission evaluated institutional capacities in various key metrics regarding institutional accountability, on a scale of 1–100: response and care, 51.6; transparency and learning, 50; governance and structure, 37.5; people and training, 32.1; prevention and environments, 6.2. Prevention, a large category of rules for interaction with minors and vulnerable persons, regulation of the digital environment, safeguarding clauses with third parties and other elements necessary to prevent future sexual abuse, is practically the only area in which the Commission found no structure to assess.

7

Digital media coverage of abuse in the Panamanian Church has implicated the Archdiocese in cases that, for the most part, are not attributable to it.

Of the 10 situations that attracted media attention between 2001 and 2025, most correspond to other jurisdictions or are not cases of abuse of minors. The public picture of the phenomenon presented by digital media does not match the actual object of this report. This fact calls for caution both from the institution and from those who report on it.

8

The documented profile of victims does not match that of State statistics.

In the Global Set, more than half of the cases with documentary evidence (54%) involve male minors, unlike the records of Panama's Public Prosecutor's Office, where victims are predominantly female: girls (aged 0–9) and adolescents (aged 10–17) (cf. Chapter IV, section 4.4). This contrast is relevant for shaping listening and prevention policies, which should not presuppose a single victim profile.

9

Sexual violence against minors and vulnerable persons in Panama is a persistent phenomenon, steadily increasing and structurally underreported, so the absence of complaints cannot be read as an absence of abuse.

(cf. sections 4.4.1 and 4.4.2) This invisibility also affects the ecclesial sphere—where official statistics barely record cases against priests, despite the cases documented in canonical archives and in the media—which required the Commission to triangulate canonical, civil and media sources in order to reconstruct, to the best of its ability, what actually occurred.

10

There is a lack of accountability.

Nearly 47% of the internal stakeholders consulted answered “yes”, or said they were unsure when asked whether there are authorities whose problematic conduct is known but has not been formally addressed (Tables 7 and 8). This is a perception, not an audit of verified cases, and it should be read as such. However, its magnitude, together with the barriers to reporting identified in the same chapter, makes it a significant indicator of the institution's relationship with the truth.

Key conclusions

(what it means)

First

The central problem documented in this report is one of record-keeping, not of denial. The Commission has found no evidence of a deliberate policy of concealment. What the evidence shows is an administrative culture that left no records: procedures initiated without a decree; investigations not closed in writing; decisions not notified; and, accompaniment that may have taken place but that was not documented. This informality has a twofold cost: it deprives the victim of knowing what happened with their complaint, and it deprives the institution of the ability to demonstrate what it did. This informality is not merely an archival problem; it reflects a governance deficit, especially the lack of qualified personnel to investigate, process and document these procedures. The provision for trained personnel, and their oversight, was the responsibility of the diocesan authority.

Second

The system revolved around the case and the accused, not around the person harmed. Not because there was a decision to exclude them—they did not ordinarily hold the status of a party, nor was there a general and express duty to keep them informed—but because nothing required their care to be documented. Therefore it was not documented. The consequence is that the pillar of repair of harm is the weakest of the five. There is no consistent or comprehensive evidence demonstrating the repair of harm in the cases examined. The weakness of this pillar, however, stems from reasons that change over time: in the first stage, the canonical framework did not require documenting care for the victim; in the second, there was a gap between an internal standard that was already binding and a practice that never became widespread; and in the most recent years, there has been a structural transformation too recent to be reflected in the records yet.

Third

Justice has been partially served. There were procedures and, in the cases where this is recorded, there were consequences. But the Commission has been unable to verify the full course of any of the 24 procedures in accordance with the canonical iter. This does not amount to impunity, but it does amount to an inability to render account, which, for an institution that has proclaimed zero tolerance, is a problem in itself. To this inability to verify the procedure is added a second, symmetrical difficulty: the available documentation does not allow a clear reconstruction of what consequences were actually imposed on those responsible, nor of how compliance with them was monitored. Accountability thus remains incomplete on both sides, that of the victim and that of the accused. This fact underpins some of the recommendations.

Fourth

The progress is real, verifiable and recent. The structures created between 2015 and 2024 are aligned with the standards the universal Church has been requiring, although the 2015 Guidelines are awaiting revision. The Commission views them positively. However, these structures are too recent for their effective functioning to be assessed. What can be demonstrated today is that they exist, but their functioning cannot yet be evaluated.

Fifth

Restoration is yet to be built, and it cannot be built before the other pillars. The reconciliation of the ecclesial community is not a starting point but a point of arrival. It presupposes acknowledged truth, justice done, harm repaired and guarantees of non-repetition. This report describes where the Archdiocese stands on that path, not where it ought to have arrived.

Sixth

This assessment was commissioned voluntarily by the Archdiocese, without any judicial mandate or request from the Holy See. The Archdiocese gave an external commission physical access to its archives and committed in advance to publishing the results without knowing their content. The Commission places these facts on record. The ultimate value of its work will depend on what is done with this report and on whether there is follow-up.



Summary of recommendations

(what must be done)

The Commission sets out 24 recommendations in Chapter X, grouped into four lines of action. Seven of them are considered priorities by the Commission for the next twelve months (marked ★).

A

Traceability: documenting what is done

- ★ A single protocol for the reception, registration and traceability of complaints that documents every step of the canonical and civil iter, including notification of decisions to the parties—no record of which appears in any of the 24 case files.
- ★ Organizing and completing the archives as the first instrument of transparency: what is documented, who holds custody of it, how it is accessed.
- Keeping a written record of every communication with civil justice authorities, in accordance with the reporting obligations in force.

B

The victim at the center: making care standard practice

- ★ Information on rights, a liaison person, specialized accompaniment and genuine access to information about the process, as standard, documented practice in all cases.
- ★ A mechanism for assessing harm and for atonement, including concrete support and symbolic reminders of reconciliation, with verification of its implementation.
- Separating the management of the canonical legal process from the accompaniment of the victim; protocols to prevent revictimization; trauma training for those who receive complaints.
- Progressively incorporating restorative justice practices and a stable pastoral ministry of accompaniment for victims and survivors.

C

Prevention and training: the weakest area

- ★ Formalizing prevention, the lowest-rated dimension (6.25/100): establishing codes of conduct, rules of interaction with minors and vulnerable persons, regulation of the digital environment, background checks for clerics and volunteers working with minors and vulnerable persons, candidate screening and mandatory periodic training, with a verifiable record.
- ★ Updating the 2015 Guidelines in line with *Vos estis lux mundi*, the reform of Book VI and the framework of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors.
- Strengthening the initial and ongoing formation of seminarians, priests and deacons: human and affective formation, a mature living of celibacy, continued accompaniment and formation.

D

Governance and accountability: making improvement verifiable

- ★ Providing the competent bodies, on a stable basis, with personnel with sufficient canonical, victimological and archival training to investigate, process and document procedures.
- Consolidating the Listening Office and giving it formal regulations, guaranteeing its continuity and independence.
- Repeating assessment periodically, measuring progress against this first application and refining the local process of assessment.