

An independent report assesses how the Archdiocese of Panama has handled allegations of abuse over the past 25 years

The Transparency Commission—a transdisciplinary research group composed of 17 experts from 8 countries—presented a report assessing the handling of allegations of abuse against minors and vulnerable individuals received by the Archdiocese of Panama between 2001 and 2025, and offering a series of recommendations.

Panama City, September 22, 2026.

The Archdiocese of Panama requested that an independent commission evaluate how it has handled allegations of abuse committed against minors and vulnerable individuals within its ranks over the past 25 years. The result, following ten months of investigation, is a comprehensive report highlighting the progress made over the past decade, including measures such as the development of an action protocol and the creation of a listening office. At the same time, the report outlines 24 recommendations—seven of which are prioritized—to improve areas such as the traceability of allegations, prevention and training, and redress and accountability.

The report, prepared by a Transparency Commission composed of academics from eight countries—mostly in Latin America—specializing in the management and prevention of abuse within the Church, was released this morning. The presentation took place in the auditorium of Santa María La Antigua University. Speakers included the Archbishop of Panama, Monsignor José Domingo Ulloa Mendieta; Father Jordi Pujol, coordinator of the Transparency Commission; and Dr. María José Valero, an expert on the report's methodology, who presented the main conclusions for each area of study.

In addition to religious and academic leaders and journalists, the event was attended by the country's civil authorities, including members of the Public Prosecutor's Office, judges of the Superior Court of Justice, the Ombudsman, and representatives of international organizations such as UNICEF, UN Women, and SENADIS. Accompanying the archbishop were the Attorney General of the Nation, Luis Carlos Manuel Gómez Rudy, and Judge Gustavo de Gracia, president of the Superior Court of Appeals for the first judicial district of the accusatory criminal justice system.

The study was commissioned by the Archdiocese itself in October 2025. An international team reviewed its archives and analyzed 24 of the 37 complaints received between 2001 and 2025; the others were excluded because they did not pertain to the territory or time period under review, or because they did not involve abuse of minors or vulnerable persons. Six fields of expertise contributed to the analysis: canon law, clinical psychology, accountability, sociology, theology, and communication.

The report highlighted improvements in the handling of complaints that occurred following the adoption of the guidelines for responding to abuse in 2015 and the creation of the Office of Listening in 2024. However, it also pointed out shortcomings. In 22 of the 24 cases analyzed, there is no record that the victim was heard during the proceedings. The accused was heard in at least eight cases. Nor is there any record in any of them that the parties were informed of the outcome of the process, nor that any remedial measures were taken.

What the Files Reveal—and What They Do Not

For most people, a file is just paperwork. For Monsignor John Paul Kimes, a specialist in canon law and former official of the Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, it is the opposite. "A case file is the way a complaint becomes a process and an institution can be held accountable for what it did," he explains. Without it, there can be no follow-up, no review, and no institutional memory.

The Archdiocese's records show how that memory is gradually lost as each case progresses. The year of the complaint is listed in 20 case files. The opening of the preliminary investigation is noted in 7. The final resolution is recorded in 2. There is no record of consequences imposed on those found responsible, nor of how compliance was monitored.

The Commission emphasizes the need to interpret this data carefully: just because something isn't documented doesn't mean it didn't happen. "We didn't find a policy of concealment, but rather a culture that left no record," explains Dr. Angelina Luna. The problem is that this lack of formal documentation leaves everyone without answers. The victim cannot know what happened to their complaint, and the institution cannot demonstrate what it did. "What isn't put in writing cannot be verified," adds Luna, "neither to the victim nor to society."

The lack of a response also has clinical consequences. Psychologist Patricia Espinosa points out that, for someone who has suffered abuse, knowing the truth and seeing it acknowledged is part of the healing process: it restores their voice and their ability to take control of their own story. When the experience is downplayed or silenced, the opposite occurs, and the person may come to doubt themselves. "Being heard is already part of the healing process," says Espinosa. "And healing begins on the very first day: in how the person is received, whether they are listened to, and whether they are told what will happen."

Case files regularly document details of the case, the accused, and the course of the proceedings, but in most cases there is no record of initial intake, information provided to the victim, or specialized support. The report proposes support procedures separate from the canonical process and centered on victims' rights. It views the Listening Office, created in 2024, as the natural place to implement them.

Why So Many Victims Never Come Forward

The figures in an archive only include those who managed to speak out. The sociocultural study focuses on those who did not and on their circumstances. Among the factors that delay or prevent reporting, it identifies fear, shame, the worry of not being believed, dependence on the abuser, and concern about how the report might affect the family or the community.

“The family and the community can be a victim’s first refuge or their first barrier,” notes Professor Santiago Leyra. “The difference begins with believing them.”

The survey of pastoral workers points in the same direction: the most frequently cited obstacles were not knowing exactly how to report the abuse, fear of retaliation, and the feeling that reporting it would be pointless. In most of the documented cases, it was the victims themselves who took the initiative. Janaina Santos warns against a reassuring interpretation of the data: “The absence of reports does not mean there is no abuse.” She also draws attention to a fact that often goes unnoticed: more than half of the victims recorded in the archives were male. “If we focus our prevention efforts on a single victim profile, we will leave many out.”

Part of that silence has cultural roots that affect the faith community itself. Several members of the Commission point to clericalism—understood as the attribution of excessive superiority to the clergy, which places authority above service. This is not about diminishing respect for the Church, but rather about distinguishing that respect from a deference that makes it difficult to challenge those who abuse. Pope Francis put it clearly in his 2018 Letter to the People of God: “To say “no” to abuse is to say an emphatic “no” to all forms of clericalism.” In that letter, he warned that clericalism is fostered by both priests and laypeople.

Asking for forgiveness requires first telling the truth

The Church has asked for forgiveness on numerous occasions for the abuses committed by some of its members. For priest and theologian Thomas Berg, such forgiveness is credible only if it is preceded by the truth. “Acknowledging what happened is the condition for forgiveness, not its consequence,” he explains.

On a personal level, the penitential tradition calls for acknowledging the fault, taking responsibility, and being willing to make amends. At the institutional level, this translates into uncovering the truth and making it public, supporting the victims, and prioritizing their healing over the institution’s image. Berg highlights a nuance that the report explicitly addresses: forgiveness is a matter of the victim’s freedom and can never be demanded of them. The responsibility lies with the institution.

That is why the absence of reparations measures in the case files is central to the recommendations. Reparations involve acknowledging the harm, assuming personal and institutional responsibility, and addressing the physical, psychological, moral, spiritual, and social needs of each person. “Reconciliation is a destination,” says

Carolina Montero. “It requires acknowledged truth, justice, reparations, and guarantees that it will not happen again.”

Real Progress That Requires Structure and Follow-Up

The report notes that case management improved with the guidelines approved in 2015 and, above all, with the creation in 2024 of the Pastoral Care and Prevention Office and the Listening Office. Progress, however, has been uneven. On the Commission’s formalization index—which ranges from 0 to 100—the response to and handling of cases scores 51.6 points, while prevention scores 6.2. The Archdiocese has learned to respond more effectively when a complaint is filed; systematic prevention remains an area needing improvement.

María Inés Franck, an accountability specialist, explains why good intentions are not enough. “Protecting minors cannot depend on who holds the position. We need structures that outlast changes in personnel.” That requires clearly defined responsibilities, metrics, and oversight. Among the proposed measures are codes of conduct for interactions with minors and vulnerable individuals, regulation of the digital environment, and protective clauses for third parties who collaborate with the Archdiocese.

The structures created in 2024 are so recent that their effectiveness cannot yet be assessed. “They exist, and that’s real progress,” acknowledges Nicolás Meyer. “What we still can’t confirm is how well they work.”

A Review Without a Preceding Scandal

Most institutional reviews—whether in companies, political parties, public agencies, or churches—come after a case makes headlines. This was the case with church reforms in the United States, Ireland, Germany, France, Spain, and Australia. In Panama, the process was different: the initiative came from the institution itself, without a court order or a request from the Holy See.

“Doing this without that pressure is rare and sets a precedent,” notes Santiago de la Cierva, a specialist in crisis communication. The report’s media analysis describes the Archdiocese’s communication as historically reactive, and this review represents a shift in approach. The Archdiocese opened its archives, did not interfere with the investigation or the drafting of the report, and committed to publishing the results without knowing what they were. “That is a meaningful gesture of transparency,” says Arturo Fitz-Herbert. The Commission was funded by Notre Dame Law School and the Villanueva University Foundation.

Experts agree that the value of this gesture will depend on what comes next. Father Jordi Pujol, the project coordinator, puts it in concrete terms: “Transparency doesn’t end with publication. It also requires reporting on how cases end, not just how they begin.” And regarding this report, Father Pujol is clear: “This report is an important step for the

victims and for the Archdiocese, but its transformative impact depends on the institution implementing and following up on the recommendations.”

■ The full report can be accessed at the following [link](#). Anyone who has suffered abuse in a Church setting may contact, whenever they wish, the Listening Office of the Archdiocese of Panama (Gerardo Guerrel: cell: +507 6667-7879; email: comunicacion@arquidiocesisdepanama.org) and file a complaint with the Public Prosecutor’s Office.