

Pope Leo XIV draws praise on handling sexual abuse—and some complicated allegations

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Cardinal Robert Prevost leads the celebration anniversary of the Diocese of Chulucanas, Peru, August 12, 2024. (Photo courtesy of Diocese of Chulucanas)

Amid the mostly joyous reception for Robert Prevost, who stunned the world when he emerged from the loggia of St. Peter's as Pope Leo XIV, one cloud on his reputation came from groups alleging that he had mishandled sexual abuse cases.

The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests and Bishop Accountability, two US-based abuse watchdog groups, have blasted Leo and elevated previous allegations—the most serious of which concern three women in the Diocese of

Chiclayo, Peru, who claim that the then-Bishop Prevost failed to properly investigate their allegations that two priests sexually abused them as children.

Last fall, the three women [signed](#) a letter stating publicly that they had told Prevost about the abuse in 2022 and had never received any offer of psychological, spiritual, or legal support. They argued that while he was leading the Chiclayo Diocese, there was no evidence that he had opened a preliminary investigation or that he had removed their alleged abusers from ministry.

[Reporting](#) from the Catholic news site Crux calls into question the narrative that the new pope was negligent in handling abusers, and Leo has been lauded by other survivors for his handling of cases of abuse.

The new pope has received particular praise for his record in dealing with Sodalitium Christianae Vitae, a lay group suppressed by the Vatican earlier this year for sexual abuse, including of minors, and other types of abuse.

Pedro Salinas, a survivor who blew the whistle on Sodalitium, [said](#) last month—before Pope Francis’s death and the subsequent conclave—that Prevost played an “extremely important role” on behalf of victims.

José Enrique Escardó, president of the Peru Survivors’ Network and a Sodalitium survivor, wrote a glowing X post in Spanish about his interactions with Prevost and Prevost’s work on Sodalitium. “I am hopeful that he can continue with what Francis moved forward and take steps that bring justice and healing to all the victims of ecclesial violence in the world,” wrote Escardó.

Hans Zollner, a Jesuit and top expert on combating sexual abuse, said in an interview that Leo was among few leaders of religious orders to attend the [Pontifical Gregorian University](#)’s first international conference on safeguarding against abuse, in 2012.

“He was very much willing to learn more and to be engaged in this,” Zollner said. “He’s a very good listener. He’s a very actionable person.”

In the case of the three women in Peru, Ricardo Coronado, a former Augustinian who had represented the survivors as their canon lawyer, appears to have had a long-standing vendetta against Leo, according to reporting by [Crux](#). Two men who were formed under Coronado’s leadership in an Augustinian community and a third

person who observed his behavior on visits told the outlet in accounts that date back to the 1990s that Coronado “openly despised” then-Father Prevost because he saw him as too progressive.

The men told Crux that Coronado himself was sexually inappropriate and aggressive and called the seminarians who were being formed by Prevost “homosexuals.” Coronado admitted on Facebook in December 2024 he was defrocked from the priesthood after he was accused of sexual misconduct, or in the Catholic clerical way of discussing sexual abuse, a “crime against the Sixth Commandment.”

Coronado also had ties to Sodalitium, according to the people who spoke to Crux, and they speculated that he might have been out to ruin the future pope’s reputation because of his actions against Sodalitium. One of them told Crux that the three women survivors had not blamed Leo until Coronado became involved.

Zollner said in an interview that he had heard from a person familiar with the canonical procedures in the case that Leo had done everything in a “timely” and aboveboard fashion. “That’s why I’m not concerned,” he said.

The Pillar, a widely read Catholic blog that reported on the women’s allegations against Leo, [reported](#) that the Diocese of Chiclayo has maintained that he handled the case appropriately, encouraging the women to go to civil authorities and forwarding the case to the Vatican’s Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The diocese said it informed the DDF that the civil case had been shelved for lack of evidence and because the statute of limitations had expired. The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests has [argued](#) that the case was simply closed because of the statute of limitations and that the diocese was negligent in claiming lack of evidence.

Based on this case, and another involving Leo’s time as provincial prior for the Augustinians in Chicago, SNAP filed a complaint under Pope Francis’s signature anti-sexual abuse law, known as Vos Estis Lux Mundi, in March.

In a second case, James Ray, a priest [accused](#) of sexually abusing multiple children, resulting in the Archdiocese of Chicago prohibiting him from being alone with children in 1990 and removing him from parish ministry the following year, was [allowed](#) in 2000 to move into Augustinian housing close to a Catholic grade school.

According to [the Chicago Sun-Times](#), the school was apparently not informed of Ray's history, but also has no record of any allegations of abuse while Ray was living there.

Crux's [reporting](#) on the Ray case only relies on one anonymous Augustinian from Chicago, but he told the outlet that the archdiocese had asked to place Ray in that house because the house's superior was the supervisor of Ray's safety plan and a licensed counselor who could keep an eye on him.

Bishop Accountability publicized a third complaint against Leo, accusing the new pope of unnecessarily maintaining secrecy about sexual abuse in his role in the Vatican curia. They wrote that in his time as prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops in the past two years, he maintained the secrecy of the Vos Estis sexual abuse discipline process, "releasing no names and no data."

"Under his watch, no complicit bishop was stripped of his title," wrote the organization, repeating their call for him to demote several bishops who allegedly mishandled sexual abuse cases, including Filipino Bishop Geraldo Alminaza and Mexican Bishop Enrique Díaz Díaz.

Despite Crux's reporting in April, SNAP stood behind its Vos Estis complaint against Leo, telling the outlet that the survivors' concerns were valid, even if their legal representation was suspect.

SNAP encouraged the cardinal electors to bypass all of the US cardinals because of their record of handling abuse allegations, and kept the Vos Estis complaint against Prevost on the organization's Conclave Watch website.

Of the 10 US cardinal electors, SNAP filed Vos Estis cases against nine. And as the conclave neared, SNAP raised concerns about more and more of the potential papabili, or papal candidates.

Zollner, whose X posts about safeguarding were retweeted several times by then-Prevost, said he hoped Leo would follow in Francis's and Pope Benedict XVI's steps in listening to victims. Zollner also said he hoped Leo would strengthen efforts to make sure Francis's anti-abuse laws were applied "consistently and transparently" when it came to church leaders who were negligent in dealing with abuse cases.

“ I do hope that, as I said, safeguarding as an integral part of the church’s mission can be much more to the forefront,” said the Jesuit, “ something that is part and parcel of how we communicate, how we live faith in all its aspects, from liturgical expressions to social activities, to education and so forth.”

Bishop Accountability urged Leo to “make ending abuse central to his papacy.”

“Some might advise giving the new pontiff benefit of the doubt. We disagree,” the organization wrote in a statement after Leo’s election. “It is on Pope Leo XIV to win the trust of victims and their families.” —Religion News Service