

Catholic Church in Australia reveals 620 sex abuse cases

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The Catholic Church in one Australian state has revealed that at least 620 children have been abused by its clergy since the 1930s, sparking a fresh call Saturday for an independent inquiry.

The Catholic Church in Victoria revealed the number in a submission to a state parliamentary hearing on Friday but said the instances of abuse reported had fallen dramatically from the “appalling” numbers of the 1960s and 1970s.

“It is shameful and shocking that this abuse, with its dramatic impact on those who were abused and their families, was committed by Catholic priests, religious and church workers,” Melbourne Archbishop Denis Hart said.

The full submission was not released publicly but the church said most of the 620 claims it had upheld over the last 16 years related to incidents 30 to 80 years ago, with very few related to abuse that has taken place since 1990.

Hart said the church had taken steps to redress the issue, including a programme implemented in the 1990s involving an independent investigation, an ongoing programme of counselling and support, and compensation.

“This submission shows how the church of today is committed to facing up to the truth and to not disguising, diminishing or avoiding the actions of those who have betrayed a sacred trust,” he said.

“We acknowledge the suffering and trauma endured by children who have been in the Church’s care, and the effect on their families. We renew our apology to them,” he said in a statement in which he spoke for church leaders in Victoria.

But victims’ supporters say the number of children abused was likely much higher than that confirmed by the church in its own inquiries.

President of the Law Institute of Victoria, Michael Holcroft, said there was a need for more independent investigations.

“Obviously there’s a public perception that the church investigating the church is Caesar judging Caesar and I think that the community is now looking for somebody external, someone independent to get to the bottom of what’s obviously been a big problem for a long, long time,” he told the ABC.

Archbishop Hart said victims were strongly encouraged to go to the police.

“We look to this inquiry to assist the healing of those who have been abused, to examine the broad context of the Church’s response, especially over the last 16 years, and to make

recommendations to enhance the care for victims and preventative measures that are now in place," he said.

The Victorian state government announced the inquiry into the handling of child abuse cases by religious and non-government bodies after the suicides of dozens of people abused by clergy.

Last year Pope Benedict XVI told Australian bishops that their work had been made more difficult by the clerical sex abuse scandal which has rocked the church as he exhorted them to "repair the errors of the past with honesty".

The pontiff met victims of abuse when he travelled to Sydney in 2008.