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# French bishop says protecting minors 'absolute priority' after confession row



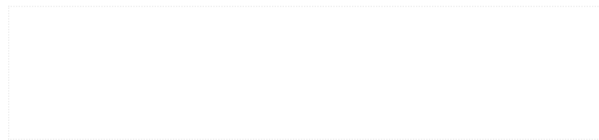
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Paris (AFP) –

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Protecting children from sexual abuse is an "absolute priority" for the Catholic Church, a French archbishop said Tuesday, walking back previous comments suggesting priests should not violate the secrets of confession.

Eric de Moulins-Beaufort sparked outrage among victims' groups last week after saying the secrecy of confession was "above the laws of the Republic".

His comments came after an independent report revealed tens of thousands of cases of sexual abuse by priests over the past seven decades.

The archbishop met Tuesday with Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin -- at the request of President Emmanuel Macron.

Afterwards, he insisted on "the determination of all bishops, and all Catholics, to make the protection of children an absolute priority, in close cooperation with the French authorities.

"The scope of the violence and sexual assaults against minors revealed by the report demands that the Church revise its practices in light of this reality," he said in a statement.

While French law recognises the professional secrecy of the sacrament of confession, it also states that this privilege does not apply to cases involving violence against minors.

De Moulins-Beaufort reiterated his "shame and consternation" over the 216,000 cases of child sex abuse by clergy since 1950, identified in the report.

The abuse was covered up by Church superiors in a systemic "veil of secrecy", it added.

He promised to "carry out the reforms necessary for the French Church to gain everyone's trust", and said he had asked Pope Francis to meet with the report's authors in the Vatican.

Francis has already expressed his "shame and horror" over the landmark report.

It recommended a series of measures to protect minors from predatory clergy, included a requirement that priests inform prosecutors of any child abuse they hear about in confession.