

## Pope Francis and Clergy Sexual Abuse in Argentina

[To see a database of accused Argentine clergy, click [here](#).]

Jorge Mario Bergoglio was archbishop of Buenos Aires from 1998 to 2013 and president of the Argentine bishops' conference from 2005 to 2011. During these years, as church officials in the US and Europe began addressing the catastrophe of child sexual abuse by clergy – and even as Popes John Paul II and Benedict made public statements – Bergoglio stayed silent about the crisis in Argentina.

He released no documents, no names of accused priests, no tallies of accused priests, no policy for handling abuse, not even an apology to victims.

In his many homilies and statements ([archived](#) on the Buenos Aires archdiocesan website), he attacked government corruption, wealth inequities, and human sex trafficking, but he said nothing about sexual violence by priests.

In [On Heaven and Earth](#) (first published in Spanish in 2010), a wide-ranging collection of conversations with Argentine rabbi Abraham Skorka, he suggested in fact that the problem did not exist in his archdiocese:

In my diocese it never happened to me, but a bishop called me once by phone to ask me what to do in a situation like this and I told him to take away the priest's faculties, not to permit him to exercise his priestly ministry again, and to initiate a canonical trial.

Bergoglio's implication, that he handled no abusive priests, is implausible. Buenos Aires is Argentina's [largest diocese](#), and Bergoglio was one of its top executives [from 1992 to 2013](#) – a period when tens of thousands of victims worldwide reported their abuse to the Church. Based on data disclosed in dioceses in the US and Europe, we estimate conservatively that from 1950 to 2013, [more than 100 Buenos Aires archdiocesan priests offended against children](#) and that dozens of them were known to archdiocesan supervisors, including Bergoglio.

BishopAccountability.org presents this overview of Bergoglio's role and the abuse crisis in the Argentina church in the hopes of facilitating more disclosure and understanding of Pope Francis's approach to this grave and pressing issue. We highlight [Bergoglio's involvement in five cases](#), the current [response to abuse by other Argentine bishops](#), and the unusually important role of [whistleblowers](#). Finally, we provide an in-depth [database of accused Argentine priests](#). Our first non-US database, this marks the launch of our global coverage; we eventually will produce accused priest databases for all countries with significant Catholic populations. (Also see [the database in Spanish](#).)

### Questions about Bergoglio's role in five abuse cases

The factors that have produced disclosure by bishops and religious superiors in other countries – civil action by victims, investigations of the church by prosecutors, and governmental inquiries – have occurred little or not at all in the Federal Capital of Buenos Aires, which is the territory of the archdiocese. As a result, almost no information has emerged about Cardinal Bergoglio's direct management of accused priests. Only one Buenos Aires archdiocesan priest – Carlos Maria Gauna – has been publicly accused. But in the high-profile cases of four child molesters from religious orders or other dioceses – Grassi, Pardo, Picciochi, and Sasso – there is evidence that Bergoglio knowingly or unwittingly slowed victims in their fight to expose and prosecute their assailants. Victims of all four offenders say that they sought the cardinal's help. None of them received it, even those who were poor, struggling on the periphery of society – the people whom Pope Francis has championed. (According to Bergoglio's former spokesman, the cardinal [declined to meet with victims](#).)

- **Fr. Julio César Grassi** – Grassi was convicted in 2009 of molesting a boy who had lived in a home for street children that Grassi founded. After Grassi's conviction, Bergoglio commissioned a secret study to persuade Supreme Court judges of Grassi's innocence. Bergoglio's intervention is believed to be at least part of the reason that Grassi remained free for more than four years following his conviction. He finally was sent to jail in September 2013. See our [detailed summary of the Grassi case](#) with links to articles.

- **Fr. Rubén Pardo** – In 2003, a priest with AIDS who had admitted to his bishop that he had sexually assaulted a boy was discovered to be hiding from law enforcement in a vicarage in the archdiocese of Buenos Aires, then headed by Bergoglio. Pardo also was reportedly hearing children's confessions and teaching in a nearby school. One of Bergoglio's auxiliary bishops, with whom he met every two weeks,



appears to have lived at the vicarage at the same time. Typically, an ordinary must give permission for a priest to live and work in his diocese. It is unlikely that Pardo lived and ministered in Buenos Aires without Bergoglio's approval. See our [detailed summary of the Pardo case](#).

- **Brother Fernando Enrique Picciochi, S.M.** – After a victim discovered that his abuser had fled Argentina to the US, eluding law enforcement, the victim sought Bergoglio's help in getting released from the confidentiality order imposed by the cleric's religious order. He conveyed his request in meetings with Bergoglio's private secretary and with the auxiliary bishop, current archbishop Mario Poli. The archdiocese would not help. See our [detailed summary of the Picciochi case](#).
- **Rev. Mario Napoleon Sasso** – In 2001, following a diagnosis as a pedophile at a church-run treatment center, Sasso was made pastor of a very poor parish with a community soup kitchen in the Zárate-Campana diocese. In 2002-2003, he sexually assaulted at least five little girls in his bedroom off the soup kitchen. In 2006, with Sasso in jail but not yet convicted, the parents of the little girls reportedly sought Bergoglio's help. Bergoglio was then president of the Argentine bishops' conference, and the soup kitchen was just 25 miles from the Buenos Aires archdiocese. Bergoglio would not meet with them. See our [detailed summary of the Sasso case](#).
- **Rev. Carlos Maria Gauna** – Gauna was an archdiocesan priest under Bergoglio's direct supervision. In 2001, two girls at a school filed a criminal complaint saying Gauna had touched them inappropriately. Bergoglio reportedly was going to look into it. Gauna still works in the Buenos Aires archdiocese. Notably, he's now a deacon and a hospital chaplain – possible indicators that Bergoglio considered the allegations credible but decided to demote him rather than remove him from ministry. See our [detailed summary of the Gauna case](#).

## Management of accused clerics by other Argentine bishops and religious superiors

Bergoglio's strategy for suppressing the crisis in Buenos Aires – his behind-the-scenes refusal to help victims combined with a total lack of transparency – continues to be the approach of many of Argentina's bishops and religious superiors.

As of March 11, 2014, a year after its most powerful prelate was elected pope, the Argentine bishops' conference has issued no significant public statement on clergy sexual abuse. Nor has it published the abuse-response policy that it was [supposed to finalize](#) and submit to the Vatican by May 2012. Such policies have been posted by bishops' conferences in [Brazil](#), [Chile](#), and [Colombia](#), as well as those in the US, Canada, Australia, and most of Europe.

Instead, as the database reveals, various Argentine bishops and religious superiors have sided publicly with convicted sex offenders. They have used threats and gag orders to silence victims. They continue to keep accused priests in ministry. They exploit both Argentina's and the Vatican's weak reporting law – they are not legally required to report to civil authorities most incidents of child sexual abuse by priests. They have enabled abusers to escape to other dioceses, other countries, and to Rome. They have argued in court that parents are to blame for their children's sexual assaults by priests. Most alarming, they have applied these practices recently. See the [examples](#) below.

## The unique importance of whistleblowers in Argentina

If not for Sebastián Cuattromo's determination to bring to justice his abuser, [Fernando Picciochi](#), the cleric still might be living freely in the US today. Because of the courage of Gabriel Ferrini and his mother Beatriz Varela, we learned of Bishop Luis Stöckler's concealment of the crimes of [Father Rubén Pardo](#). The prosecution of [Father Grassi](#) resulted from an October 2002 broadcast by *Telenoche Investiga* and the work of journalist Miriam Lewin and her colleagues. Archbishop Storni would have escaped prosecution if not for journalist Olga Wornat's book, *Nuestra Santa Madre*. [Father Napeolon Mario Sasso](#) might still be assaulting little girls if not for the determination of three whistleblowers, Lia López, Sr. Martha Pelloni, and Father Luiz Guzmán. An investigation by journalist Daniel Enz published in *Analisis* magazine revealed the crimes of [Father Justo José Illarraz](#) and his protection by Paraná archbishops Karlic, Marlion, and Puiggari.

### Notes:

#### 1. Number of accused priests in Catholic dioceses where there has been significant disclosure

- In the diocese of Manchester, New Hampshire, USA, with less than one half the priests of Buenos Aires, the Attorney General's office documented alleged abuse by [98 Catholic clerics](#) from 1950 to 2009.
- In the Providence, Rhode Island, USA diocese, which has had on average one half the number of priests as Buenos Aires, a bishop admitted to [125 accused priests](#) since 1971.
- In the Los Angeles CA archdiocese, about 1.5 times larger than Buenos Aires (measured by number of priests), [265 clerics](#) [click on Los Angeles] have been accused publicly.

#### 2. Responses by Argentine Bishops and Religious Superiors to Cases of Child Sexual Abuse by Priests

- In September 2013, the bishop of Rio Negro, Monsignor Marcelo Cuenca Revuelta, stated publicly that [Father Julio César Grassi](#), a convicted priest whose guilt had been confirmed by two appeals courts, was "completely innocent." He said the priest had been framed by unnamed parties that want to punish Grassi and impede the church's outreach to poor children.
- In August 2013, molestation charges against [Father Justo José Illarraz](#) were dismissed. Yet church officials do not dispute that they have known since the early 1990s of Illarraz's sexual abuse of many boys, ages 12 to 14. The priest even admitted to the abuse in a secret church trial in 1995. But because the priest's archbishop, Cardinal Estanislao Esteban Karlic of Paraná, had sworn Illarraz's victims to secrecy, the crimes were not reported to law enforcement until 2012, shortly after the 20-year reporting period had expired. Karlic's

successors, Archbishops Mario Luis Bautista Maulión (2003-2010) and Juan Alberto Puiggari (2010- ), also kept Ilarraz's crimes secret, allowing him to stay in ministry in another diocese until 2012. In August 2013, Cardinal Karlic's lawyer [applauded](#) the dismissal of the case against Ilarraz and defended the cardinal's cover-up: "This was a crime of private action. Parents should have made the complaint."

- In April 2013, attorneys for Bishop Luis Stöckler of the Quilmes diocese argued in court that Beatriz Varela was partially responsible for her son's sexual assault by [Father Rubén Pardo](#) because she had allowed the boy to stay overnight with the priest. The court ruled in favor of Ms. Varela and her son.
- In 2004, authorities considered pressing criminal charges against Bishop Rafael Rey of Zárate-Campana for enabling the sexual assault of girls as young as age five by [Father Mario Napoleón Sasso](#). Rey had assigned Sasso to run a parish and soup kitchen in a poor neighborhood in 2001 despite knowing that Sasso had recently been treated for pedophilia at a church-run treatment center. In 2002 and 2003, Sasso molested at least five young girls who frequented the soup kitchen. Prosecutors spared Rey and instead charged two lower-ranking priests in the diocese for enabling Sasso to elude arrest.