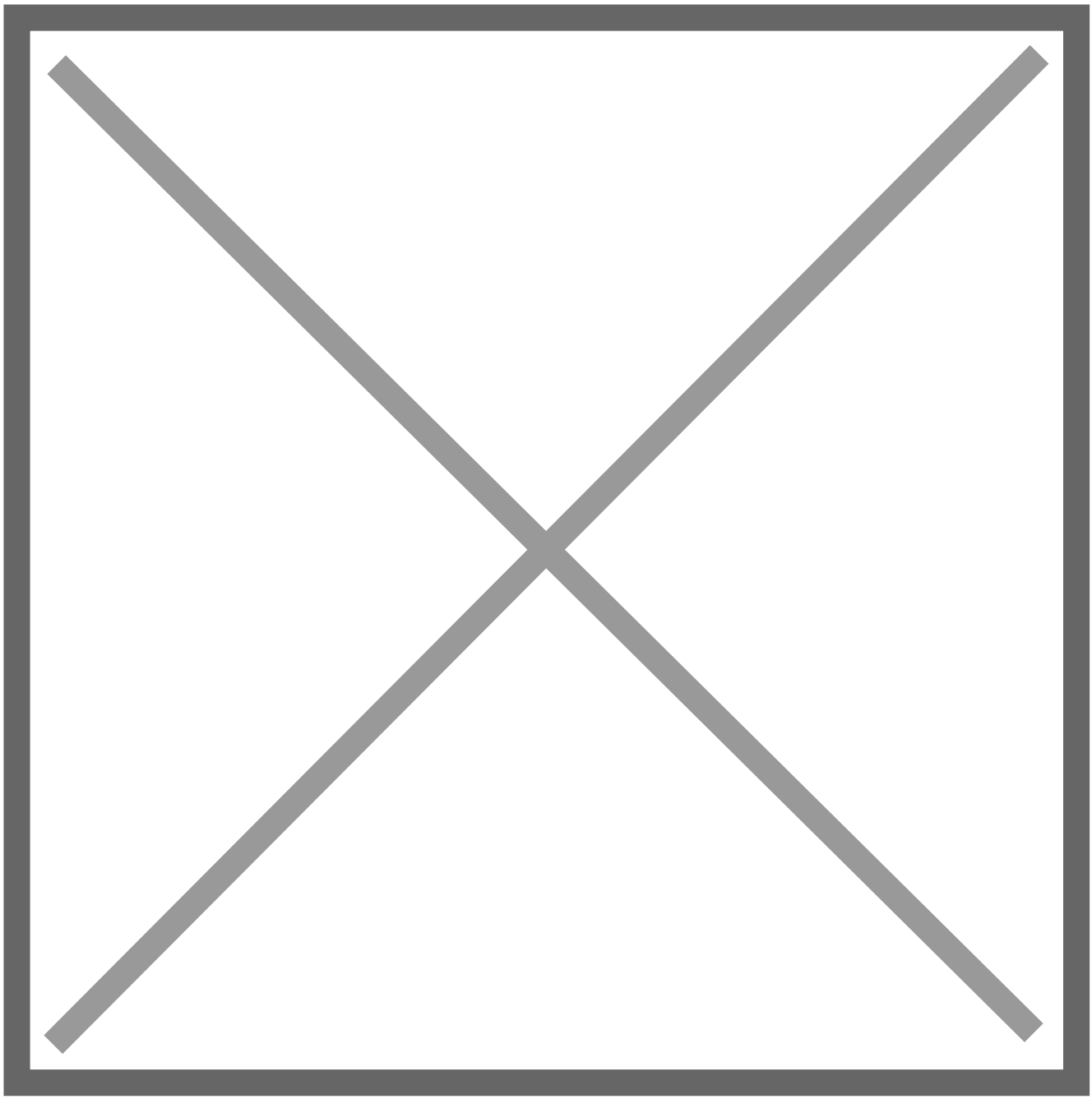
News



The Spanish bishops conclude their special plenary assembly July 9, 2024. Archbishop Luis Argüello of Valladolid, president of the Spanish bishops' conference, is pictured in the center, with Cardinal José Cobo of Madrid (at left) and Cardinal Juan José Omella of Barcelona (at right). (OSV News/Courtesy of the Spanish bishops' conference)



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Spanish church leaders have criticized media treatment of a diocesan bishop who resigned over accusations of sexual abuse, amid renewed debates over the church's historic role in the traditionally Catholic country.

"We must take into account the presumption of innocence, because sometimes the perpetrators can be the victims," said Archbishop Jesús Sanz of Oviedo.

"This bishop asked to be relieved of his duties months ago as a cancer sufferer. Then came the complaint — or rather, the complaint became public — and this has complicated matters," the archbishop said.

He was reacting to Pope Leo XIV's Nov. 22 acceptance of the resignation of Bishop Rafael Zornoza of Cádiz-Ceuta, the first serving Spanish diocesan to quit over abuse claims.

Speaking to journalists, Sanz said the church remained close to both "alleged victims

and alleged perpetrators," and urged media restraint pending full investigations.

Meanwhile, Bishop Ginés García Beltrán of Getafe, said treatment of Zornoza, who denies abuse claims, had been especially hurtful to priests and laypeople working with him during his 14 years at Cádiz-Ceuta.

In resignation statement, Zornoza thanked the pope for showing "understanding and paternal closeness" since he first submitted his resignation in July 2024 on reaching 75.

He added that he trusted God in his "defense against an unjust and false accusation," and would collaborate with "everything contributing to unity" in the Cádiz-Ceuta Diocese, where an interim administrator, Auxiliary Bishop Ramón Valdivia, took office Nov. 29.

The Associated Press reported that the bishops' resignation hadn't been accepted until the El País newspaper reported earlier in November that Zornoza had been recently placed under investigation by a church tribunal. The daily said the bishop was accused of abusing a young former seminarian while he was a young priest and directed the diocesan seminary in Getafe, according to AP.

José Francisco Serrano, a journalism professor at Madrid's Catholic San Pablo University told OSV News while he feared Zornoza had already been "condemned in the eyes of the public" when a Vatican investigation of his case was leaked to El País, he added it was unclear why the pope had not accepted his resignation before the abuse accusations became public.

The resignation of Zornoza, who was accused of abusing a minor while a seminary director in the 1990s, followed fresh discussion of compensation for abuse victims during a late November bishops' conference plenary.

The plenary coincided with church Masses marking 50 years since the death of dictator Gen. Francisco Franco (1892-1975), which also prompted fresh debate on the church's role in Spain's 1975-1978 transition to democracy.

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In a plenary address, the conference president, Archbishop Luis Javier Argüello García of Valladolid, said the dictator's death had brought a "new status for the church in Spain," which had already moved "from adherence to Franco to critical distancing" in line with the 1962-1965 Second Vatican Council.

He conceded the church had maintained a "unique relationship" with the dictator following its "extraordinary persecution" during the 1936-1939 civil war, which saw over 6,800 clergy and religious murdered, and had risked "not seeing the suffering of other Spaniards," who faced "summary trials and death sentences."

However, it had begun distancing itself from Franco's regime after 1958, Argüello said, and had "collaborated decisively" with the transition to democracy under King Juan Carlos II, whose 1975 coronation was commemorated across Spain on Nov. 27.

Anniversary protests were reported against previous church backing for Franco, notably after a Nov. 21 commemorative Mass for members of the dictator's family at Madrid's Church of the Twelve Apostles, when topless anti-fascist protesters from the Femen group clashed with Franco sympathizers.

However, a senior Catholic academic told OSV News that Argüello had been right in stressing that Spain's Catholic bishops disowned Franco's regime well before the dictator's death in November 1975.

"The politicization of certain sectors of Spanish Catholicism, on both extreme right and left, still creates a negative image by subordinating faith to ideology," said Serrano of Madrid's San Pablo University.

"But the church underwent its own ecclesial transition before the political transition — it was thus a decisive social actor in the democratic transition," he said.

Over 58% of Spanish citizens still identify as Catholics, according to 2024 data, while the church has reported a rise in seminary admissions and ordinations over the past year across its 70 dioceses.

However, 60% of young citizens claimed to "have no religion" in a new survey published Nov. 26, while church leaders have clashed repeatedly with the socialist-led government of Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, in power since 2018, over

laws restricting religious education and liberalizing abortion, euthanasia and gender recognition.

In his plenary address, Argüello criticized rising inequality, "chronic poverty" and the "inhumanity of abortion" in Spain, and urged Catholics to increase public engagement to prevent a "society driven by fear."

While the bishops have many social issues to address, Serrano told OSV News that the latest case of Zornoza had "profoundly impacted" the Spanish church, forcing its bishops to "reflect collectively on what constitutes credible facts."

"The church has responded to sexual abuse with investigations, an independent law firm audit, victim support offices, normative instructions and a comprehensive reparation plan for victims," said Serrano, a former chief editor of the church's Alfa y Omega weekly.

"The problem has been its delayed response and clear failures in prevention and communication. This has complicated public perceptions and fuelled efforts by some sectors of society to use this grave crime and heinous sin to discredit the church in a campaign of distrust."