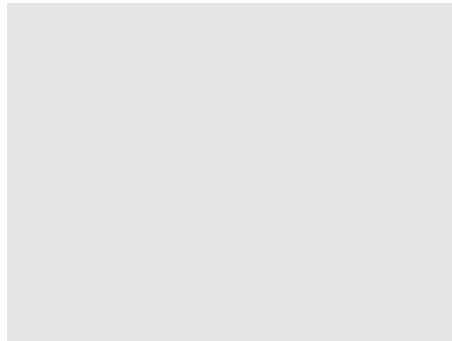


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## N.M. attorney general announces report on priest abuse, potential prosecution

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Hector Balderas

Outgoing Attorney General Hector Balderas said Thursday his office is in the final stages of completing a sweeping risk report on clergy sex abuse in New Mexico and evaluating possible prosecution of a priest accused of wrongdoing.

“We are advancing a criminal investigation of a [Catholic priest], and we’re finalizing that risk report, and I’ve made that part of my transition briefing to the next attorney general,” he said in an interview with *The New Mexican*.

Balderas, barred from seeking reelection due to term limits, said he decided to allow the administration of successor Raúl Torrez, who will take office Sunday, to finalize the report because of the active criminal investigation.

Balderas declined to identify the priest or the allegations against him, saying it would be unethical and prejudice the investigation.

The update on Balderas' inquiry into a sex abuse scandal that has rocked the Catholic Church in New Mexico comes more than four years after he demanded the three dioceses in the state turn over a trove of documents as part of an effort to reveal the magnitude of abuse and any cover-up by the church.

Among the documents Balderas asked the dioceses to provide were complaints of sexual abuse at the hands of clergy or other officials and any documentation of how church officials responded to such allegations.

"It is time to demand full disclosure and full transparency," Balderas wrote at the time to the dioceses of Santa Fe, Las Cruces and Gallup.

Asked why the inquiry has taken so long to complete, Balderas disputed the assertion.

"I think it would be unfair to characterize it that it's taking too long when no other institution has stepped up — the Legislature, law enforcement, the clergy, all the law firms that got payouts in the '90s that are hiding under confidentiality. They haven't produced a report," he said.

Balderas also said New Mexico has been "one of the most aggressive and timely states" in terms of disclosure.

"Pennsylvania issued a grand jury report," he said. "We're one of the early states that would be issuing some type of risk report."

The report evaluated historical conduct and what Balderas called "current engagements" with the three dioceses in New Mexico, as well as lessons learned from criminal prosecutions.

The dioceses provided his office access to the documents he requested, but "it was definitely a legal fight," he said. Two months after Balderas announced his inquiry, agents in his office served a search warrant on the Archdiocese of Santa Fe. At the time, Balderas wrote the goal of the diocese's lawyers seemed to be delaying and creating barriers, though the diocese denied the allegation.

"They initially resisted," he said, referring to all three dioceses in New Mexico. "But they did allow us full access, and a lot of that information we relied on as part of assessing risk. It was very helpful, those disclosures, to the families in acknowledging abuse."

Only “very few remaining” cases qualify for criminal prosecution, he said. Many priests accused of abuse are now dead, or the statute of limitations rendered many cases inactive, he said.

“That’s part of the tragedy,” he said. “There’s been such a system failure from the ’70s, ’80s and ’90s that these cases should have been evaluated and investigated generations earlier. But we’re still searching for needles in a haystack of victims.”

Balderas, who grew up as an altar boy in Wagon Mound, said he was raised in the Catholic Church at the same time a lot of the abuse took place.

“I personally related to the victims and our culture,” he said. “I think the Catholic community really did trust me ... because I was one of their own, and I think it was an important step for healing to carry on these investigations and prosecute these cases with the seriousness of being independent and also being very fair, so I think part of the accountability phase of the justice system is part of the healing process.”

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