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Pope Francis: Church should admit abuse of women, children, and history of male domination

By Philip Pullella

Independent.ie (02.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2G9ff4G> - Pope Francis said on Tuesday the Catholic Church had to acknowledge a history of male domination and sexual abuse of women and children and repair its reputation among young people or risk becoming "a museum".

But, in a major document in which he mentioned an array of scandals and again admitted significant failings by clergy, he also said the Church "could not agree with everything some feminist groups propose," a clear reference to the Church's ban on a female priesthood.

The pope is grappling with criticism over the Church's response to a decades-long clerical sexual abuse crisis that has gravely damaged its standing around the globe and seen it pay out billions of dollars in compensation.

Francis made his comment in a 50-page "Apostolic Exhortation" about a month-long meeting of bishops in October on the role of young people in the 1.3 billion-member Church.

Francis, 82, urged young people not to be disillusioned by the sexual abuse scandal, but to work with the overwhelming majority of priests and other clergy faithful to their vocation.

He said clergy sexual abuse was "a tragedy" and asked young people to help the Church in "this dark moment".

"A living Church can look back on history and acknowledge a fair share of male authoritarianism, domination, various forms of enslavement, abuse and sexist violence," the pontiff said.

"With this outlook, she can support the call to respect women's rights, and offer convinced support for greater reciprocity between males and females, while not agreeing with everything some feminist groups propose," he said.

Some women's groups seek a female priesthood. The Church has ruled this out, arguing Jesus chose only men as his apostles.

This month the all-female staff of the Vatican newspaper's monthly magazine on women's issues resigned, saying a new editor sought to put them "under direct male control".

Recent stories in the magazine include one on sexual abuse of nuns by priests. The editor has denied their accusations.

Winning back trust

Francis acknowledged the Church had to win back many young people who see it as insignificant in their lives or a nuisance.

He said such a view of the Church can "have serious and understandable reasons: sexual and financial scandals; a clergy ill-prepared to engage effectively with the sensitivities of the young."

The Church had to keep and attract young people by better explaining its doctrine, he said.

"A Church always on the defensive, which loses her humility and stops listening to others, which leaves no room for questions, loses her youth and turns into a museum," he said.

The pope did not mention demands by women participants at the synod that they be allowed to vote in future synods.

But while he said the Church should be "attentive to the legitimate claims of those women who seek greater justice and equality" and that young people had complained of a "lack of leading female role models," he offered no new ideas. Only a handful of women hold positions of authority in the Vatican.

The pope did not expand on homosexuality, saying only that the synod discussed it.

They say they were sexually abused by priests, then silenced. Now these women are speaking out

By Melissa Bell, Saskya Vandoorne and Laura Smith-Spark

CNN (20.02.2019) - <https://cnn.it/2GAVOES> - Lucie was just 16 when she became involved with a Catholic religious community after attending a holiday camp in Switzerland. At the time, she told CNN, she was "very, very, very alone" and looking for friends and affection.

What she found at first was "really like a family," she said. But two years later -- by which time she was preparing to become an "oblato," a lay person affiliated with a religious order -- she says a pattern of sexual abuse by a charismatic priest who she considered her spiritual father began.

It took 15 years for Lucie -- a pseudonym used at her request to protect her family -- to realize that what she says she experienced over several months in the 1990s was abuse. At the time, just 18 years old, she felt "disgusted" by the physical intimacy she says the priest forced on her but also wracked by guilt and powerless to stop him.

"It was like automatic you know. He wanted to go to the end -- to ejaculation -- and I was just like an object for him and I had a feeling he did this a lot of times," she said.

Her story is not unique.

CNN has spoken to several other women who say they are victims of the devastating sexual, psychological and spiritual abuse they suffered within the Community of St. John.

For Liene Moreau, who says she was abused by a priest in France for 15 years, starting when she was a novice, or trainee nun, in her 20s, the breach of trust and of faith were the hardest part to deal with.

"The psychological abuse was worse than the sexual abuse; it's my inner life, he took my dignity, my femininity, all that I was. And still today it is very hard to have confidence in myself," she said.

'Acts contrary to chastity'

The order to which the women belonged, the Contemplative Sisters of St. John, was founded at St. Jodard in the Loire region of France, in the early 1980s -- one of three orders set up by Father Marie-Dominique Philippe.

Laurence Poujade, a former nun who now heads a victims' organization, says Philippe's doctrine -- and his crimes -- are at the heart of the order's problems today.

"He believed that because he was involved in mysticism, everything was possible," she told CNN. "But no, everything was not possible.

"I think very often about the victims who will never be able to be heard," she said. "We are talking about victims who don't speak out, but what about those who went straight to psychiatric hospitals, what about those who mutilated themselves? I know of one case, her parents called me to tell she had cut out her own tongue. What can you say? What can have happened for a victim to do that?"

In 2013, seven years after his death, the Brothers of St. John revealed that Philippe "had committed acts contrary to chastity with several adult women whom he accompanied at the time." Nuns were among the victims of this abuse, the order later confirmed. For years, there were also rumors about other priests and other victims within the order.

But the lid was fully lifted on the scandal earlier this month, when Pope Francis for the first time acknowledged the sexual abuse of nuns and other women by priests and bishops as a "problem" for the church.

In one breakaway part of the Community of St. John, "corruption" had reached the point of "sexual slavery," he told reporters, leading his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, to dissolve it in 2013.

The Vatican subsequently sought to soften that characterization, saying that when Francis "spoke of 'sexual slavery,' he meant 'manipulation,' a form of abuse of power which is reflected also in sexual abuse."

But the genie was out of the bottle. And it's clear the Catholic Church -- already grappling with a global scandal over the sexual abuse of children by clergy -- has questions to answer.

'Pope's words 'like a bomb'

Shortly after the Pope's comments, the Community of St. John issued a statement recognizing that, beyond the allegations against its founder, "some sisters or former sisters have also testified that brothers and priests of the community were also responsible for abuse. Many of these brothers and priests have already been sanctioned and others are in the process of being sanctioned."

CNN contacted the Vatican for a response to this story; its spokesman would not comment on any specific allegations but did confirm that cases involving clerics belonging to the Congregation of St. John were being investigated by the Vatican.

For Lucie, Francis' words were a watershed moment. They brought huge relief -- and a sense of justification after years spent struggling to be heard. "When I first read the article, it was incredible, it was like a bomb," she told CNN, in her first interview about her experience with a branch of the St. John community in Switzerland.

"I thought, like, okay, everything we tried to tell the Vatican, the Pope, the bishop, there is something happening... because sexual abuse, nobody ever say before."

'I couldn't see him as a predator'

Lucie told CNN her alleged abuser had misused his position of authority and the order's central tenet of "loving friendship" to justify what he was doing.

On the first occasion Lucie says the priest tried to kiss her on the mouth, she pushed him away. But she says he was not deterred. "I didn't feel I had any power in front of him, I couldn't say really something. When I was trying, he always had arguments to tell me that I'm wrong and he's right. How can I not believe him?" she told CNN.

"He was taking off his clothes and I saw everything -- it was the first time of my life, and I was really disgusted. But I realize that on the moment I didn't feel anything. Because I was not there anymore, it was a protection, to not feel."

Lucie has struggled to grasp why she didn't realize what was happening at the time but now believes it was down to that disassociation and what she calls brainwashing. "It was absolutely 100% impossible for me to see him like a predator," she said.

In response to the allegations made by Lucie, a spokesman for the St. John community told CNN there had been "several accusations of sexual abuse" made towards this particular priest and that he had left the community 10 years ago.

"It is now the Vatican's responsibility to look into these complaints and a legal proceeding is ongoing," the spokesman said. "All the measures at our disposal have been taken to remove him from the community."

Search for justice

The problem is not isolated to one rogue community. In recent months, CNN and several other news organizations have highlighted the abuse of nuns by male clergy elsewhere in Europe, as well as in Asia, South America and Africa.

Bishops from around the world have been summoned by the Pope to an unprecedented summit this week in Rome to discuss the crisis over clerical sexual abuse. But the four-day meeting will likely focus on the shocking array of claims of abuse of children.

All the women who spoke to CNN said their first struggle was simply to recognize the abuse for what it was. Only after many years did they seek justice, first within the church and then through the courts.

Lucie, who is now married with five children, tried to take her alleged abuser to civil court, but a Swiss public prosecutor ruled that the statute of limitations had expired. A lawyer for the priest declined to comment to CNN on the allegations made by Lucie.

Lucie, who eventually moved to Belgium and still attends church regularly in the small village where she lives, says that before attempting legal action, she had tried unsuccessfully to raise the issue with the St. John community.

"After I don't know, maybe two years, I was conscious that the community was not doing anything, I was talking about (it) with other victims, realizing that they know, that it's been 15 years that they know, that there's other victims. So they don't want to do anything," she said.

Moreau, now 41 and married with three daughters, tried to take her alleged abuser to court in France, but the statute of limitations meant the case was dropped by the Tours prosecutor.

She sought a meeting in 2017 with the priest in question, to confront him, but was advised against it by the order. A brother from the St. John community sent an email in November 2017, seen by CNN, in which he acknowledged "the gravity of the abuse" Moreau suffered but said she must see a psychotherapist for her own sake before seeking contact with that priest.

In letters shown by Moreau to CNN, dating from her time with the order, the priest suggests "discretion... in the future we will have to meet elsewhere ... I pray that we can find clever ways of meeting." He ends by saying that his "crazy love" for her comes from Jesus.

Moreau, who is Lithuanian and at first spoke limited French, now thinks the priest may have targeted her in part because of that.

"I was far from my family, in a foreign country, this is already something, and that might also be why he chose me, an easy prey in the end," she said. The priest also made her believe that the fault was hers, as a "temptress," she said, despite the fact she says she tried to distance herself from him.

The priest in question is being investigated by the Vatican and has been removed from some of his duties, a St. John community spokesman said.

In a February 7 statement, the leaders of the three orders within the Community of St. John said they condemned "every situation of sexual abuse and abuse of power" and reaffirmed "their clear resolve to eradicate any and all abusive situations."

They said the order dissolved by Benedict in 2013 -- and referenced by Francis -- was a small, Spain-based splinter group which separated from the St. John community in 2012 after church authorities tried to bring in reforms following Philippe's death.

The dissolution of the order has brought little closure for Moreau, who is still coming to terms with what she says happened to her.

"It lasted for 15 years, and it's now been two years since I was able to put the word 'abuse' on this, and still today it's very complicated to admit that I might be a victim," she said.

"If only just for myself, I don't want to be a victim. And yeah, I feel responsible because he made me responsible, he made me complicit in his acts."

Men and women religious feel shame for failures on abuse

"The abuse of children is wrong anywhere and anytime: this point is not negotiable." This is what the leaders of men and women religious of the world have declared ahead of the "Meeting on the Protection of Minors" in the Vatican, Feb. 21-24.

By Robin Gomes

Vatican News (19.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Vgl1rt> - "We ask pardon of all for our failures and repeat that we stand with the Holy Father. We commit our efforts to working with him so that the Church can move forward in a coherent, credible and unified way, a way that is genuinely healing, truly renewed, with new eyes to see and new ears to hear."

The International Union of Superiors General (UISG), which brings together the superiors general of institutes of Catholic women religious, and the Union of Superiors General (USG) that brings heads of men's religious institutes, issued a joint declaration on Tuesday expressing their full support for the Meeting on the Protection of Minors, called for by Pope Francis.

Children - most vulnerable

"In our work as religious, we come across many situations where children are abused, neglected, maltreated and unwanted," the religious superiors wrote. "We see child soldiers; the trafficking of minors; the sexual abuse of minors; the physical and emotional abuse of minors. They cry out to us."

As adults, as Christians and as religious they said they "want to work so that their lives are changed and that the situations in which they are brought up are improved." They underscored the vulnerability of these children which they said makes them "dispensable, to be used and abused."

Abuse of authority

The religious superiors noted that the Feb . 21-24 meeting will focus on the abuse of minors by people of authority in the Church, especially bishops, priests and religious, a story, they said, is full of pain "that has continued for decades".

"We bow our heads in shame at the realization that such abuse has taken place in our congregations and orders, and in our Church." "Our shame is increased by our own lack of realization of what has been happening," and those in authority "failed to see warning signs or failed to take them seriously."

Change

The religious superiors acknowledge that 3-day Vatican meeting is a short time, but they expressed their trust in the power of the Holy Spirit that with the winds of change blowing through the Church and goodwill on all sides, important processes and structures of accountability can be started and those already in place can be reinforced.

"The abuse of children is wrong anywhere and anytime: this point is not negotiable," they emphasized.

Areas of work

Following the example of Pope Francis, the men and women religious commit themselves to "humbly acknowledge and confess the wrongs that have been done; to reach out to survivors; to learn from them how to accompany those who have been abused and how they wish" their stories be heard.

The UISG and USG identified 3 areas where children are treasured and where their safety is promoted – in education and health care, in formation and in spirituality.

The many schools and hospitals that the religious orders run can ensure better protocols and higher standards of protection of minors.

The protection of minors and adults can be integrated into the formation programme of religious institutes. "It must be clear that whatever the culture and background, the abuse of children is never permitted or tolerable," they stressed.

The religious superiors also intend that their spirituality centres develop special outreach programmes to any survivor who wishes to find help in their struggles with faith and meaning." Even though some of the abuse victims would want to stay far from the Church, the religious would like to humbly accompany those survivors who want to make a journey of healing with them.

"Those who have been abused often carry a sense of guilt, shame and even sin. In reality, however, they are the ones who have been sinned against," the religious superiors said.

Working, walking together

"We want to act with humility. We want to see our blind spots. We want to name any abuse of power. We commit to engage in a journey with those we serve, moving forward with transparency and trust, honesty and sincere repentance."

The heads of religious orders want to work with parents, especially mothers, in fighting abuse. They acknowledged that their attempt to deal with abuse showed a "shameful lack of capacity to understand" their pain of the victims. While offering them their sincerest apologies and sorrow, they invited them to work with them to help minimize risks.