

COVID-19: A church of the St Pius X Society in Paris faces 'fake news' and stigmatisation

By Willy Fautré, *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (29.05.2020) - The Church of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet does not have a good reputation in France and the Vatican. Since 27 February 1977, when it was forcibly occupied by people affiliated with the Society of Saint Pius X (SSPX), which it unofficially depends on, this church is the main place of worship for the traditionalist Catholic movement in Paris. Expulsion orders have been issued by courts, but they have never been implemented. The mass is said in Latin and the new modernising adaptations by the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Vatican II (1962-1965) are banned.

COVID-19 provided an ideal opportunity for some media outlets to discredit this controversial church by using questionable methods and arguments. It all started on Easter Sunday.

Media snowball effect and escalation

Sunday 12 April 2020 (Easter), AFP-La Croix/ Covid 19 : a clandestine Easter mass in the Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet church
(<https://bit.ly/2ZDwSVT>)

Under the title of this AFP press release, which the daily paper La Croix published without any comment or verification, was the subtitle: "A clandestine Easter mass has taken place in the Saturday-Sunday night in the traditionalist Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet church in Paris. Church members participated and the priest was fined for breaching the confinement regulations."

According to this release,

- a few dozen people participated in a mass at this church in the 5th arrondissement (district) in Paris, which continues to celebrate the mass in Latin, despite Vatican II
- on Saturday evening, local residents alerted the police after having heard music coming from the church
- at midnight, members exited the church and told the police that there had been about forty people inside
- police officers contacted the priest, who was fined, according to an unidentified police source
- a video broadcasting on YouTube showed around thirty clerics and children serving the mass, without any masks and without respecting social distancing rules
- the video broadcast on YouTube showed about 30 clerics and children serving the mass, all of them without a mask and no social distancing
- the eucharist was distributed from hand to mouth to a dozen participants
- there were no attendees in the church

Sunday 12 April 2020, Police station/ Twitter

On that day, the Twitter account of the police station read: "this night in #Paris05, a religious service took place in a church despite the confinement measures. When the

police came to control it, all doors were closed. After the mass they fined the ecclesiastical authority that led the mass." Where and when a priest would have been fined was not mentioned in the tweet.

Strange message from the police: A mass celebration may take place despite the confinement measures, but only if people do not participate and it happens behind closed doors, which was the case with the Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet church. In all cathedrals in France, Easter masses were celebrated by bishops behind closed doors. Moreover, it is not in the habits of the French police to crackdown on a Catholic church, a Protestant temple, a mosque or a synagogue.

Sunday 12 April 2020, Le Point/ Clandestine Easter mass
(<https://bit.ly/2ZGff7R>)

Le Point additionally declared that a 135 EUR fine had been imposed on a priest.

One must wonder how any police action was possible if the doors were shut and how the police imposed a fine on a priest in a closed church.

Moreover, Le Point posted a video showing a church full of people inside. However, this was an archived picture and not the alleged clandestine evening mass of 11 April. Moreover, it was not a screen shot either.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the charismatic leader of a left-wing political movement, used his interview on the prime-time RTL-TV programme « Le Grand Jury » to decry Catholics.

Two days later, Christophe Castaner, the Minister of the Interior, declared on France-Inter: "I was shocked by the celebration of this mass. It is irresponsible for a priest to hold it." Despite basing this statement on fake news, this minister was not reproached by anyone. One must wonder whether he would have reacted in the same way, without any preliminary investigation into the story, if it had been about another religious community.

Tuesday 14 April 2020, Le Progrès/ Clandestine mass, a fine imposed on traditionalists (<https://bit.ly/3es37eW>)

This article reported that when the police arrived, the doors of the church were shut and the participants had slipped away. Therefore no one was fined.

Tuesday 14 April 2020, Valeurs Actuelles/ Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, « fake news » and coronavirus : the media in bad faith crisis
(<https://bit.ly/3grxDqN>)

Father Danzic, a columnist at Valeurs Actuelles, declared that:

- since the beginning of the confinement, it has been posted on the church website that church members could not participate in religious services and that they would be celebrated live on YouTube
- the Easter Vigil was not « clandestine », instead it was celebrated at 10.30pm in the church and aired live on YouTube (26,000 views as of 14 April).

Wednesday 15 April 2020, Le Point/ Clandestine mass in Paris: the police told to leave (<https://bit.ly/2M1WzY5>)

Three days later, Le Point countered with an article titled: "Clandestine mass in Paris: the police told to leave". This gave the impression that the police had been driven out of the church, when in fact it was closed. In the article, it was said that the officers went back to the police station on their superiors' orders, which, according to the journalist, was an incomprehensible gesture of indulgence.

Without any serious evidence, the journalist continued with more accusations, which strengthened the stigmatising effect of his article:

- the presence of outside participants during the religious service, which is false
- statements made by alleged participants to the police officers at the exit, another lie as there were no participants for the police to speak to
- the "incomprehensible" indulgence, according to the journalist, towards the attendees, as if the hierarchy of the police was lax in this situation
- the police station saying to the Minister of the Interior that "the participants left the church through other exits" and had therefore eluded them, which is a non-established fact and an assumption without any evidence.

Worse still, the journalist described the video posted on the website of Le Point as « staggering » evidence of violations of the confinement rules, even though he knew that it was not the video of the Easter religious service.

What are the facts?

The pictures distributed by the Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet speak for themselves:

<https://twitter.com/MichelJanva/status/1249449549661450250>
<https://www.lesalonbeige.fr/une-messe-denoncee-par-des-voisins/>

Moreover, the official church's comment reveals the name of the priest – Petrucci – and asserts that he was never fined.

On Saturday evening, local residents near the Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet church heard some music coming from inside the place of worship and alerted the police. Police officers were sent to the church, but the doors were shut. As there was nothing amiss, they informed the police station which then ordered them to return. Inside the church, there had been an Easter vigil celebration only with the clerics, which was broadcast live on YouTube for people to watch from their homes.

Prominent French media outlets did not hesitate to attack a Catholic community, without clear and undisputable evidence, because it is traditionalist and not mainstream. These are, of course, not valid reasons for accusing a church of imaginary offences. Moreover, as this community poses a challenge to the Roman Catholic Church, it is unsurprising that Catholic media did not establish the truth.

These French newspapers:

- re-published an AFP press release and a biased article of Le Point, without any investigation or verification
- failed to contact a spokesperson from the Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet church to hear their version of the story
- failed to interview abbot Petrucci, who is in charge of the church
- used stigmatising vocabulary to describe unfounded facts such as: clandestine mass, a church full of participants, incomprehensible indulgence by the police, staggering video, etc.

- circulated a fake video of the Easter vigil mass allegedly held in that church on Easter eve
- ignored and disregarded screen shots posted online by the accused church community which demonstrated that the confinement measures specific to religious celebrations had been respected
- never questioned the authenticity of the said screen shots.

In a previous article, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* (HRWF) denounced the same problematic disregard toward journalistic ethics in a case where an Evangelical community in Mulhouse (France) was scapegoated for the pandemic. See <https://hrwf.eu/france-covid-19-scapegoating-an-evangelical-church-in-mulhouse/>.

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