News



Cathédrale Notre-Dame des Doms d'Avignon in Avignon, France, in 2017. (Wikimedia Commons/Sebastiandoe5)

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"Why? Why? Why did you let it go on for so long?" the cleric asks.

The room full of priests is frozen in silence by the words of the foreign-born confrere here in the Archdiocese of Avignon, France.

One after another they begin to speak up.

One priest speaks of the "dark years." Another says he'd been "robbed of a part of his priesthood."

Archbishop Georges Pontier listens in silence before opening a dialogue.

Some 70 of the archdiocese's 100 presbyters have gathered February 9 in the cathedral to speak to Pontier, their temporary "apostolic administrator."

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It has been nearly a month since their former ordinary, Archbishop Jean-Pierre Cattenoz, stepped down at age 75.

And the priests tell Pontier their grave concerns about the way Cattenoz governed for the Church these last 18 years in Avignon, located in the city in Provence that was the 14th century seat of the papacy.

Archbishop Pontier is minding the shop, as it were, until the July 11 installation of the recently named Archbishop François Fonlupt.

But it's not the first time he's heard about the problems concerning Cattenoz's leadership.

Pontier served as archbishop of Marseille (2006-2019) and president of the Bishops' Conference of France (2013-2019). And during those years he heard plenty of priests and lay people denounce Cattenoz for an "abuse of authority."

He seemed shaken and somewhat defensive when pressed on the issue.

"The situation can lead one to wonder about the possible abuse of authority, yes. It raises questions about the institutional structure of the Church: between the bishop and the pope, there are virtually no intermediate levels," the archbishop told La

Croix.

"Shouldn't the institution give itself the means to hear and accompany the suffering of those who encounter serious and lasting difficulties with their bishop?" he asked.

Today, the institutional Church, as well as certain media — including La Croix — understand that there has long been a partial and false reading of these "serious and lasting" difficulties.

For more than ten years, a group called Chrétiens en Vaucluse (a pro-Vatican II group of Catholics in the Department of Vaucluse), were in constant conflict with Archbishop Cattenoz, a headstrong man who could be provocative and even brutal at times.

But their clash was always reckoned to be based on differences of an ideological and pastoral nature.

These divergences dug a deep rift between an archbishop focused on the new evangelization, displaying his "uncompromising" positions against abortion, homosexuality and Islam, and a group of lay people attached to the legacy of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

> "Shouldn't the institution give itself the means to hear and accompany the suffering of those who encounter serious and lasting difficulties with their bishop?"
>
> — *Archbishop Georges Pontier*
>
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Everything had to go through him

A lengthy investigation and about 35 interviews, reveal a very different reality.

In addition to Chrétiens en Vaucluse, which claims to have long pointed out a "personality problem," a dozen diocesan priests — half of whom say they are of a rather conservative persuasion and some of whom initially showed a certain closeness to Archbishop Cattenoz — have spoken to La Croix of an episcopal authority that was exercised in an abusive manner.

They accuse the archbishop of refusing to listen or consult others. They say he made decisions on his own that often seemed arbitrary. And they say he enforced them by bullying and using other types of pressure.

Archbishop Cattenoz, who has retired to another diocese in France (Bayonne), declined to speak to La Croix.One of his former close collaborators remembers that the archbishop "called him at all hours of the day or night."

A parish priest in the center of Avignon recounts that Cattenoz made contradictory decisions a few months apart, and that "everything always had to go through him."

A priest in the north of the department confided that he had been accused of having "dipped into his parish's coffers" the day he opposed the archbishop.

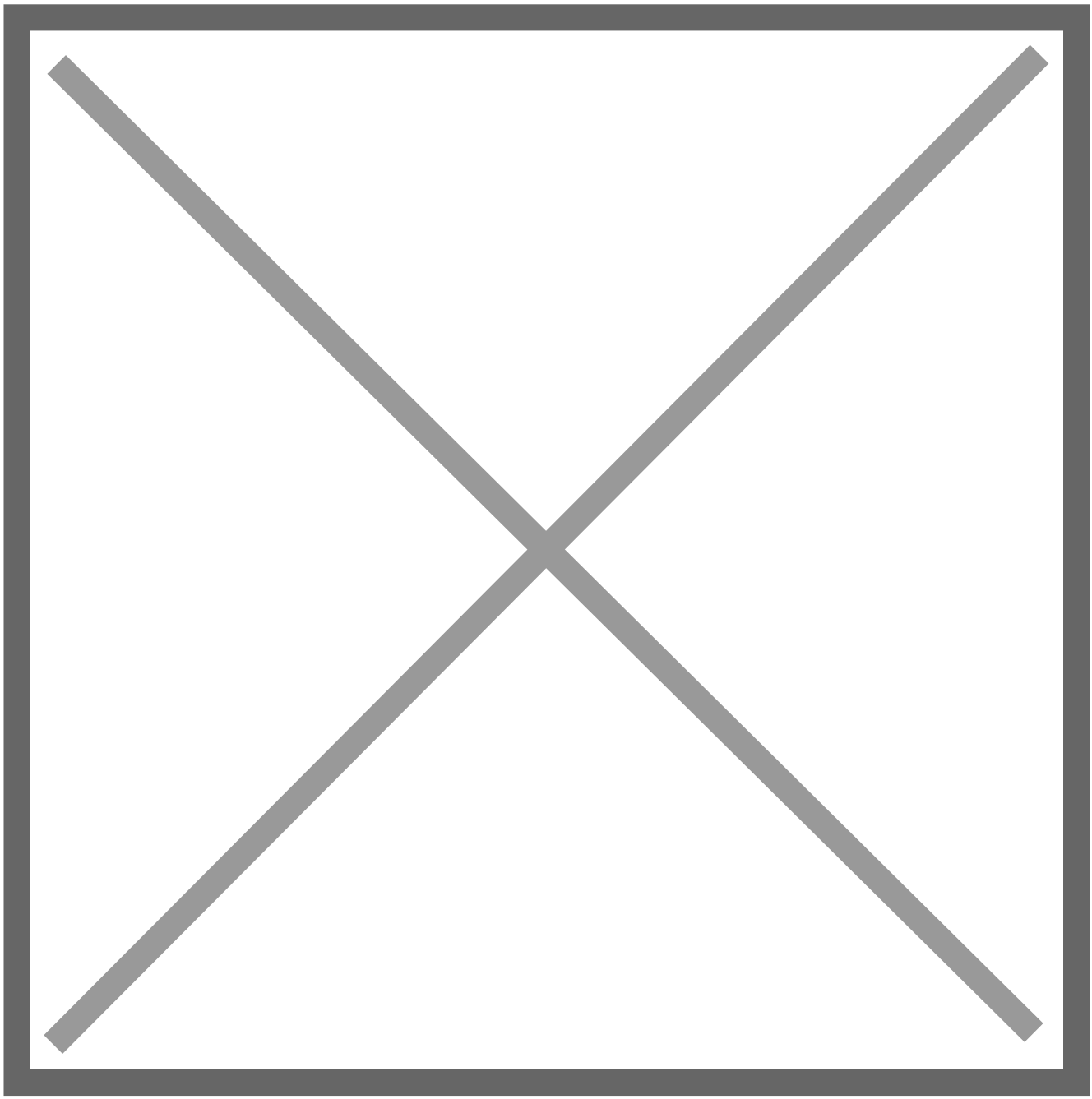
Numerous sources said Archbishop Cattenoz also seemed to "obsess" over rumors about gay or alcoholic priests, going around "snooping" in their private lives as well as speaking publicly in front of lay people about the "display" of intimacy by such and such a priest.

"After sexual abuse, abuse of authority will be the next big scandal in the Church," predicts Baudouin Ardillier, pastor of the parish of Saint-Ruf in Avignon.

He says he "saw nothing" of the problem for several years.

But Ardillier, a member of the Community of St. Jean, says the unveiling of abuse in his religious congregation helped him to gradually identify certain common elements in the archdiocese.

These included the "destruction of checks and balances" (notably through the weakening of the presbyteral council), a "manipulative theology" (for example, one priest claims to have heard Archbishop Cattenoz say on several occasions: "Take off my head, put Jesus' in its place, and you will know who you are obeying when you obey me") and the establishment of a "system of submission" around his personality (perceived as "providential" in the face of a "dissolute and poorly trained" clergy).



Archbishop Jean-Pierre Cattenoz of Avignon, France, is pictured in an undated photo. (CNS/courtesy Archdiocese of Avignon)

Resignations and depression

The archbishop has and maintains his supporters.

Some Catholics working in the archdiocese believe he had "a hard time" with priests who were "resistant to authority."

Most of the foreign priests in the archdiocese remained loyal to the archbishop, who gave them and the foreign communities living in the area much attention.

As for the laity living elsewhere in the department, some are grateful for the archbishop's missionary "impetus" and his use of "clear language" in the media. But they also admit that they were not close to him.

"We were doing very well far from Avignon," said several Catholics we met.

But the situation seemed to deteriorate rapidly.

After some initial isolated departures, all eight deans of the presbyteral council resigned in 2009.

It was a dramatic move, to say the least.

More and more priests, out of "fear" of the archbishop or to show their disagreement, stopped going to important events, such as the yearly Chrism Mass.

Two groups of presbyters gradually began to take shape: one that was "pro" Cattenoz and the that that was "anti" Cattenoz.

A climate of suspicion developed. Some priests say they were seeing each other again after 15 years of no encounters.

On a personal level, several priests experienced insomnia, anxiety attacks and depression.

Some of them had to seek psychological care, hospitalization or a long stay away from Avignon.

Dominique Vallon, the priest who was archbishop's former vicar general, has been serving the diocese of Tahiti since 2016.

"I was a bit presumptuous: I thought my resignation would have an effect at the nunciature. That has not been the case," he says.

> "After sexual abuse, abuse of authority will be the next big scandal in the Church."
>
> *— Fr. Baudouin Ardillier*

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2 million euro deficit

This lack of understanding is shared by many.

In addition to the few priests who say they tried to convince Archbishop Cattenoz to resign, several of them (like the members of Chrétiens en Vaucluse) have repeatedly approached the apostolic nuncio, the metropolitan archbishop (of Marseille) or the president of the French bishops' conference.

"We were always told the same thing: be patient and pray," they say.

They assumed Archbishop Cattenoz must have had supporters in the Vatican or that the institution was either powerless to do anything or just tended to minimize the gravity of the situation.

The Archdiocese of Avignon was caught up by a very concrete reality in 2018 when it recorded a deficit of around 2 million euros. It was due to a costly pastoral care ministry that was the subject of very little consultation.

"It has been at least ten years since the budget of the archdiocese has been balanced, but until 2018 it was subsidized through bequests," explains Jean-Claude Paret, who chaired a financial renewal commission in 2019.

"As a member of the diocesan economic affairs council, I alerted the archbishop as early as 2012, but he said that Providence would do what was necessary. No one seemed capable of standing up to him," Paret laments.

Archbishop Cattenoz is close to the Neocatechumenal Way. And less than a year before his February 2020 retirement he inaugurated a seminary run by the movement in a city in the archdiocese.

The archdiocese actually poured 4 million euros into the seminary project, completely draining its coffers.

Cattenoz had publicly affirmed that this would not cost the archdiocese anything. But it was later revealed that the Neocatechumenal Way had never signed an agreement to reimburse the funds.

Several priests from Avignon are calling on the French bishops to set up a listening commission. They have accused their former archbishop of having "ruined the archdiocese, on a human, spiritual and financial level" and say they "had not been truly listened to."

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