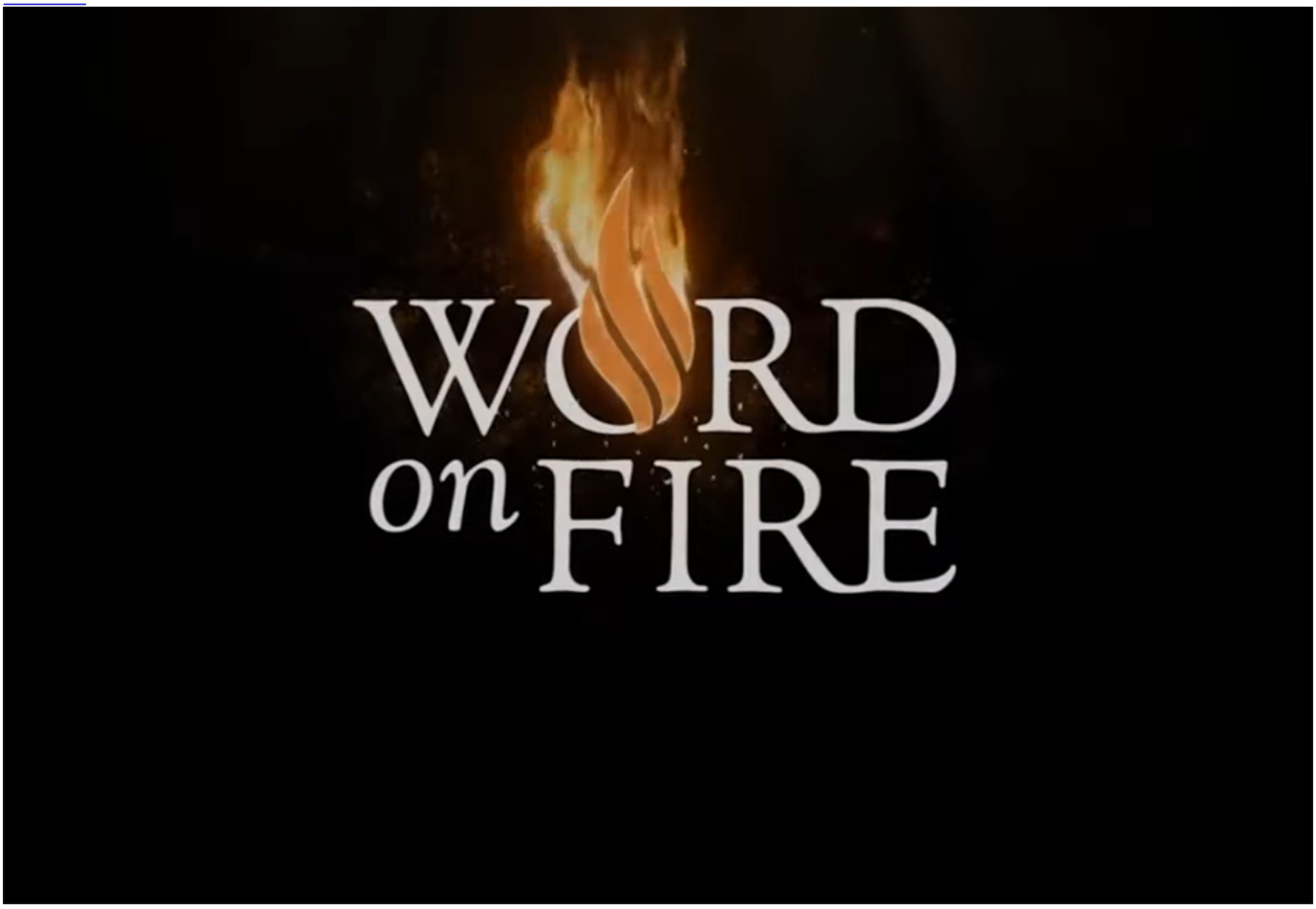
News



The Word on Fire logo is seen in a promotional video on the Word on Fire Institute website. (NCR screengrab/YouTube/Word on Fire Institute)



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June 1, 2022

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Frustrated by poor communication and a workplace culture they say has been warped by secrecy and hypermasculinity, at least a half-dozen Word on Fire employees in recent months have resigned from the Catholic outlet founded by Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Robert Barron.

Those who remain at the Illinois-based multimedia nonprofit are working in an environment that a few recently departed workers described to NCR as beset by low morale, damaged trust and a "boys' club" culture that made some female employees uncomfortable and others unwilling to raise concerns to leadership.

"To put it bluntly, I do not feel that if I had been one of the victims, I would have been protected in any way," said a former staff member, who left Word on Fire after working there for about a year.

The former employee, one of several who asked not to be named for fear of being blacklisted in the Catholic media industry, told NCR that issues pertaining to morality and safety influenced their decision to leave.

Perhaps best known for "Catholicism" — a slickly produced 10-part docuseries that ran on some PBS channels in 2011 — Word on Fire's once pristine image and that of its high-profile founder have taken hits in recent weeks amid its handling of sexual

misconduct allegations against one of its former employees, Joseph Gloor.

Gloor — a 40-year-old former bodybuilder, fitness model and MTV personality who became a Word on Fire senior producer and photographer and its highest-paid employee — was accused last year by four women of aggressive, nonconsensual sexual behavior in his personal life.



This is a screengrab of Word on Fire Catholic Ministries' website May 5. The nonprofit global media apostolate was founded by Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Robert Barron. (CNS)

Two of the women also accused Gloor of using his status and close relationships with Barron and Fr. Steven Grunow, the CEO of Word on Fire, to attract and sexually abuse or harass women. Through an attorney, Gloor has denied each of the accusations.

Barron told Word on Fire staff during a companywide Google Meet virtual gathering on Oct. 13, 2021, that Word on Fire had received letters from four women through

the company's whistleblower protocols about two months prior.

According to a transcript of the October meeting, which was obtained by NCR and authenticated by a Word on Fire employee who has since resigned, Barron said the women were accusing Gloor of inappropriate or abusive sexual behavior in his personal life.

None of the four women worked at Word on Fire. All four had known and dated Gloor in the past.

Word on Fire fired Gloor in October after a three-week investigation conducted by the Los Angeles office of Davis Wright Tremaine, a law firm with multiple locations in the United States. A Word on Fire spokesman, who spoke for the organization but asked not to be identified by name, told NCR that a subcommittee of the organization's board of directors handled the investigation, and decided to fire Gloor.



Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Robert Barron, founder of Word on Fire Catholic Ministries, speaks during the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore Nov. 11, 2019. (CNS/Bob Roller)

"When the charges were first submitted to Word on Fire, Bishop Barron learned of them and conveyed to the board [of directors] that he wanted everyone to have a say during the process so that the investigation was fair and thorough, which only affirmed the standards of Word on Fire's own protocols. The subcommittee of the board, and certainly Bishop Barron, wanted the ministry's complaint policies to be followed to the letter," the spokesman said.

According to an Oct. 11, 2021, letter sent from Davis Wright Tremaine to one of the women alleging misconduct by Gloor, the three-week investigation into his behavior found that "it was more likely than not" that Gloor had made advances "that were unwelcome in some instances, although the evidence was at times quite mixed."

Patricia Rodriguez, a lawyer in Pasadena, California, who identified herself as Gloor's attorney, told NCR in an email that the accusations against Gloor were false. She said "the whole ordeal boils down to a falling out" between Gloor and one of the women, who is not a Word on Fire employee and who Rodriguez claimed had been in a relationship with her client "for nearly a decade."

However, the investigation conducted by the law firm indirectly brought to light simmering workplace issues, according to informed sources and the transcript of the internal companywide meeting on Oct. 13, 2021.

According to the transcript, employees at Word on Fire said they were not informed about the investigation; they were only told that Gloor was on extended leave. Those who tried to ask about Gloor said they were threatened with termination, according to the document.

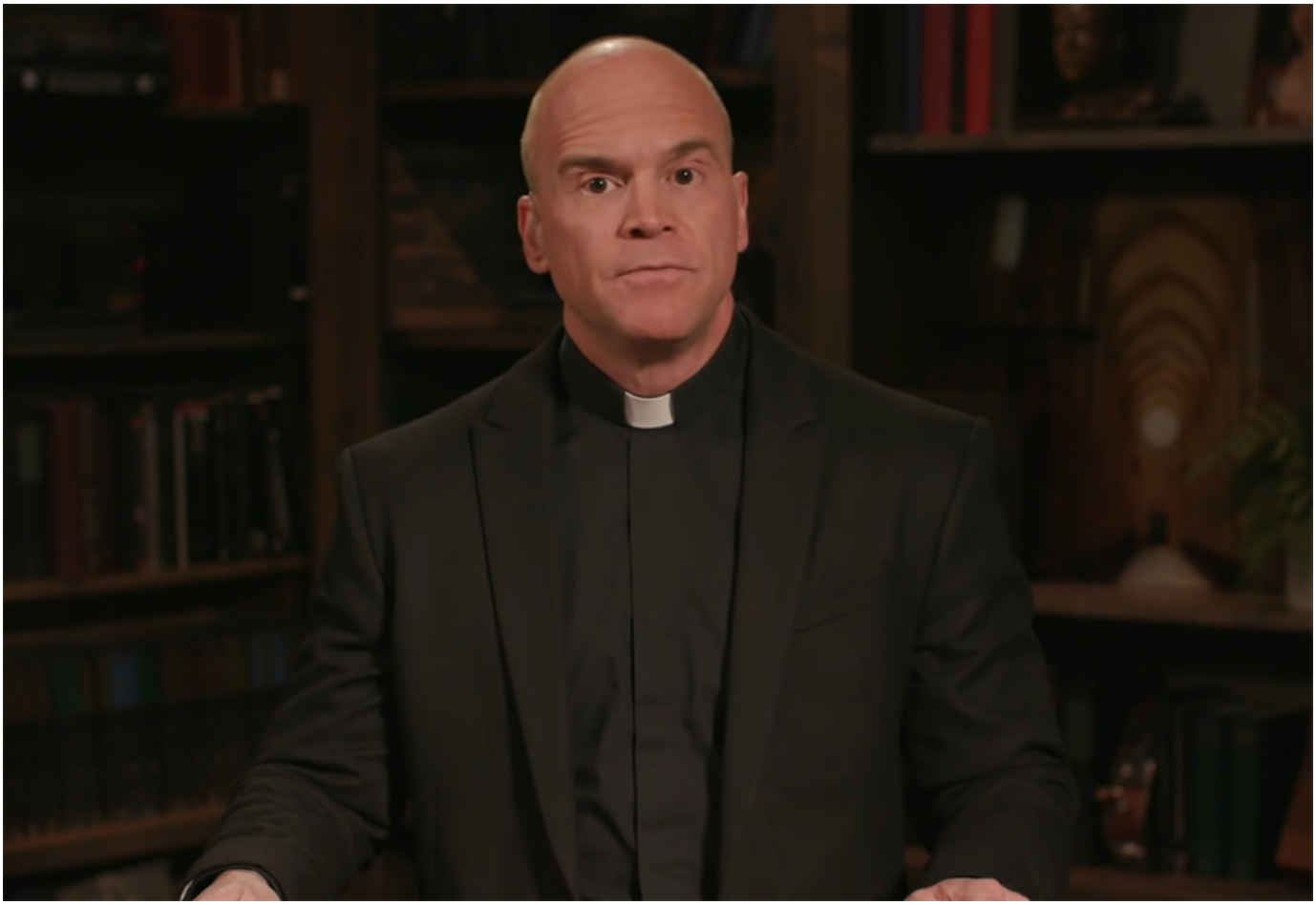
"If anybody talks about this, they're fired on the spot," Grunow, the CEO, is said to have told several employees, in the context of Word on Fire dealing with a confidential investigation into the allegations. Barron claimed to not know anything about those threats. "Yeah, that's the first I've heard of that," he said in the meeting.

Several employees during that meeting spoke of a workplace culture that they described as being marred by a lack of transparency and an intimidating atmosphere where they did not feel safe to raise their concerns.

According to the transcript, Grunow was protective of Gloor to the point where one employee said Grunow made "poor professional decisions." Barron asked the Word on Fire staff to pray for Grunow because the episode had "been a tough, tough time for him." Several former employees said Grunow had taken a leave of absence by the time they left.

NCR asked Word on Fire if Barron had spoken with Grunow about the employees' stated concerns about him threatening to fire employees. The spokesman said Grunow followed legal advice to maintain "the strictest confidentiality" about the investigation.

"In his interaction with staff, Fr. Grunow followed that instruction, communicating the serious need for confidentiality. The need for confidentiality was communicated in an appropriately serious manner," the spokesman said.



Fr. Steve Grunow, CEO of Word on Fire (NCR screengrab/YouTube/Word on Fire Institute)

Barron also struck a sympathetic tone for Gloor, telling those on the companywide call that the investigation had also been "a difficult period" for Gloor, who Barron said "loved Word on Fire with his whole heart and soul." Barron added that protecting Word on Fire "was paramount in his mind."

As for the women who came forward with their allegations against Gloor, Barron referred to them as "accusers" who had had every opportunity to be heard. During the meeting, Barron mentioned one of the alleged victims, who had known Gloor for several years, by name.

"This was not like some one-off thing, they've known each other for over 10 years," said Barron, who emphasized several times that "nothing criminal" had happened.

"These took place within the context of consensual relations between adults," said Barron, who parsed Gloor's alleged behaviors as "unwelcome" sexual advances in the context of consensual relationships.

After one employee asked Barron "[h]ow can we say that these things are not criminal?" the bishop responded: "You know, bottom line is, if the accusers feel it's a criminal matter, then bring it to the attention of the courts. So, it's not for Word on Fire to adjudicate criminality."

"I'm not a policeman," said Barron, who told the employees that "every legal person" the organization had spoken to had said that they would have disregarded the women's letters because "they have no legal status or bearing."

"But hey, everyone knew, given our unique situation as a Catholic ministry, that there's a PR, it's a PR issue, it's a public relations issue," Barron said, claiming that there was "never a question of any sort of legal implications or ramifications."

Related: Evangelizing young 'nones' is Bishop Robert Barron's brand

The Word on Fire spokesman told NCR that Barron's statements attributed to him in the transcript "do not represent his personal opinions concerning the legal characterization of the interactions between Gloor and the victims."

"Rather, those were the conclusions reached by the independent, third-party investigator based on her experienced and professional assessment after extensive interviews and analysis of the evidence provided by those involved," the spokesman said.

A woman from Orange County, California, who said she has known Gloor for about a decade, briefly dated him years ago, and tried to maintain an amicable relationship with him, challenged Barron's characterizations in an interview with NCR, which has agreed not to identify her as she is an alleged victim of sexual abuse and harassment.

While Rodriguez claimed that Gloor and the Orange County woman had dated "for nearly a decade," the woman told NCR she and Gloor had known each other for a decade but only briefly dated during that timeframe.

In the NCR interview, the Orange County woman said she reached out to the three other women whom she knew had also been involved with Gloor to inform them that he had sexually assaulted her, and that she would be contacting Word on Fire. She told NCR the other women also wanted to write letters detailing their own experiences.

According to the transcript of the Oct. 13, 2021, companywide meeting, Barron said the women's letters "kicked in the Word on Fire whistleblower protocol." He said the organization's board of directors was notified. "Following that protocol, we were obliged to conduct an investigation of the charges," Barron said.



A screengrab from a promotional video on the Word on Fire Institute website (NCR screengrab/YouTube/Word on Fire Institute)

The Orange County woman said along with her letter she included evidence such as videos and photographs of Gloor nude and semi-nude, walking around her house last summer with his penis exposed against her consent and touching himself in her backyard. Fearful for her safety, she said she locked herself in her bedroom overnight when Gloor stayed over at her house. The woman presented to NCR a

photograph of a man who appears to be Gloor, walking in her kitchen with his penis exposed, and a series of photographs of that same man sitting on her back porch with his hand down his pants, that she said she had sent to Word on Fire.

The next morning, the woman said Gloor continued to pursue what she alleged was abusive contact while at her house. The woman said she then offered to take Gloor out to breakfast, in order to leave the house. According to her, they only parted ways because he was late to meet up with the bishop at a nearby conference, the reason he was in town and staying at her home. She said this incident prompted her to call police to fill out a report and to write a letter to Barron.

Rodriguez, Gloor's lawyer, said that Gloor had provided the investigators "a voluminous amount of irrefutable evidence" such as texts, emails, photos and video footage to show that his former girlfriend had in fact made "unwelcome advances towards him and sexually harassed him over the years." After an NCR request for corroborating materials regarding alleged misconduct by the Orange County woman, Rodriguez responded: "We are not able to provide anything further at this time due to confidentiality and privacy reasons."

The Orange County woman told NCR that she "categorically" denies Rodriguez's characterization of her conduct. She called the lawyer's statement part of a "typical 'blame the victim' mentality."

In her letter to Barron, the Orange County woman detailed years of what she alleged was abuse by Gloor.

"When he started to work for you is when I became worried because I am aware of his predatory habits," she wrote to Barron. She further warned Barron that Gloor "likes to use positions of power to gain access to the people he wants, and he has done exactly that."

Highest-paid employee

According to Word on Fire's 990 tax filing for the tax year beginning July 1, 2019, to June 30, 2020, Gloor was the organization's highest-paid employee with a $135,657 annual salary. He earned more than Word on Fire's development director, John Barron, the brother of Bishop Barron, who had a $127,975 salary, according to tax documents.

Bishop Barron's Word on Fire salary for the tax year beginning July 1, 2019, to June 30, 2020, was reported at $37,694. Grunow, the priest-CEO, had a $58,904 salary, while Sean Lee, the senior director of operations who is currently serving as the interim CEO, had a $116,029 salary, according to the documents.

Founded by Bishop Barron and incorporated in 2007 as a nonprofit in Illinois, Word on Fire in the tax year beginning July 1, 2019, to June 30, 2020, reported $9.2 million in revenue, $3.6 million in operating expenses and 28 paid employees. The organization had since grown to the point where 58 staff members participated in last October's companywide meeting.

Since that internal Google Meet videoconference last October, at least six Word on Fire employees have resigned. Four of the resignees spoke to NCR; two others announced their decisions publicly.

Gloor appeared on MTV's "I Used to be Fat" television show in the 2000s and was also a fitness model and bodybuilder as well as a theater and English teacher in Los Angeles. He joined Word on Fire in 2016 after he said he experienced a life-changing religious conversion, according to a 2019 article by Bishop Barron.



People are seen walking to a Word on Fire event in a promotional video on the Word on Fire Institute website. (NCR screengrab/YouTube/Word on Fire Institute)

Most articles and videos of Gloor talking about the Catholic faith and his role at Word on Fire seem to have been removed from the organization's website and social media channels. For example, one Reddit thread referring to a video of Gloor talking about his spiritual journey is still available, but the video itself has been removed from YouTube. The Internet archival tool Wayback Machine also has captured references to Gloor on Bishop Robert Barron's YouTube account that are no longer available.

Two former Word on Fire employees who spoke with NCR described Gloor as someone who pushed boundaries and lines at work, such as openly talking about his dating life and communicating with them outside of work hours by text messages instead of using email or the company's internal Slack channel, even when they asked him not to use text.

In last October's companywide Google meeting, several employees said Gloor's conduct had raised "red flags" for them. A Word on Fire spokesman told NCR that the organization denied that there were any red flags with Gloor.

"Suggestions that Gloor received 'preferential treatment' are contradicted by his immediate termination from Word on Fire following the investigation," the spokesman said.

Rodriguez, Gloor's attorney, said accusations from "disgruntled employees" about her client's behavior in the workplace were "completely false and absurd." Rodriguez said Gloor "was respectful and kind to everyone," "followed all the work protocols" and "never met" many of the staffers at Word on Fire.

"The Santa Barbara office where he worked consisted of only three employees — him and two other men," Rodriguez said, referring to the Word on Fire location in California where Gloor worked with Barron and Grunow.

The same day as the Google meeting, the Orange County woman called police after she said Gloor showed up at her house and yelled at her from his car window.

"He pulled up at my house as I was loading up the dogs to leave, and he was yelling out his car window," she said. "I said, 'I'm calling the police,' and I dialed 911. I had my friend on the phone while I waited for them to arrive, because I figured if something happened to me, then she would know."

Police officers arrived and wrote an incident report, but did not take any further action since Gloor had not trespassed on her property, she said. The night before that incident, she said Gloor had sent her messages on Instagram, pleading for her to remove a public social media post that he believed she had posted about the investigation. She showed the messages to NCR.

Advertisement

Of the three other women who also wrote letters to Word on Fire last year, two detailed occasions on which Gloor grabbed at their bodies without their consent. Another woman's letter spoke of a consensual relationship with Gloor, but said Gloor pushed her boundaries by becoming sexually aggressive, saying things that made her uncomfortable, and undressing in front of her without her permission.

According to the transcript, two of the women declined to speak with the investigator. One woman withdrew her letter. Only the Orange County woman spoke with the investigator.

Gloor's lawyer said in her emailed statement that "none of these relationships had anything to do with his job." The lawyer said Word on Fire "followed protocols as if this were a workplace matter" in commissioning an investigation "into the details of [Gloor's] private life."

In the Oct. 13, 2021, meeting with Word on Fire employees, Barron presented Gloor's transgressions as him having been unchaste.

"Joe, I can say to his credit, once he heard these [allegations], he admitted, 'Yes, I had been unchaste,' " said Barron, who added that Gloor "emphatically" denied to an investigator that any of his actions were "unwanted" or "unwelcome."

"But you know, that's Joe's perspective. We had to go with the investigator," Barron said.

Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Robert Barron speaks June 11, 2019, on the first day of the sprin

Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Robert Barron speaks June 11, 2019, on the first day of the spring general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. (CNS/Bob Roller)

Davis Wright Tremaine — the Los Angeles law firm hired by Word on Fire — appointed a third-party investigator to interview witnesses and gather evidence, according the transcript of the October companywide Google video meeting. On Oct. 11, 2021, Janet L. Grumer, an attorney at the law firm, wrote a letter to the Orange County woman who cooperated with the investigation. NCR obtained a copy of that letter.

Grumer wrote that the investigation found that "it was more likely than not" that Gloor had made advances "that were unwelcome in some instances, although the evidence was at times quite mixed."

"Word on Fire determined that a significant portion of the reported conduct is considered unchaste and sinful according to Catholic morality," Grumer wrote, adding that Gloor had undergone "other third-party assessments related to his conduct."

"Mr. Gloor remains suspended while he undergoes compelled and intense direction from a third-party provider who specializes in working with Church leadership who manifest issues of unchastity," wrote Grumer, who added that Gloor had been required to turn over his text messages with the alleged victims during the investigation.

Grumer's letter also held out the possibility that Gloor would return to work at Word on Fire, albeit with conditions: restrictions on his use of personal social media and a prohibition from using dating apps. Gloor was to also be monitored closely and any indication he was using his position out of self-interest would be "dealt with severely."

While the letter does not address the question of whether Gloor's behavior was criminal, Rodriguez claimed in her email to NCR that the investigation "concluded that [Gloor] committed no crimes." Regarding the women's allegations, Rodriguez said there was "nothing non-consensual and nothing work related."

"All the allegations fall into the categories of formally withdrawn, dropped, unfounded, and unsubstantiated," Rodriguez said. "This is a personal matter in their personal lives."

Two days after Grumer's letter was written, Barron announced in the companywide Google virtual meeting that Gloor had been fired, but said that the "process" had been "accelerated" by what he believed to be a public social media post that the Orange County woman had supposedly written the night before. She told NCR that she had mentioned the investigation in a private group chat, but had not posted it publicly.

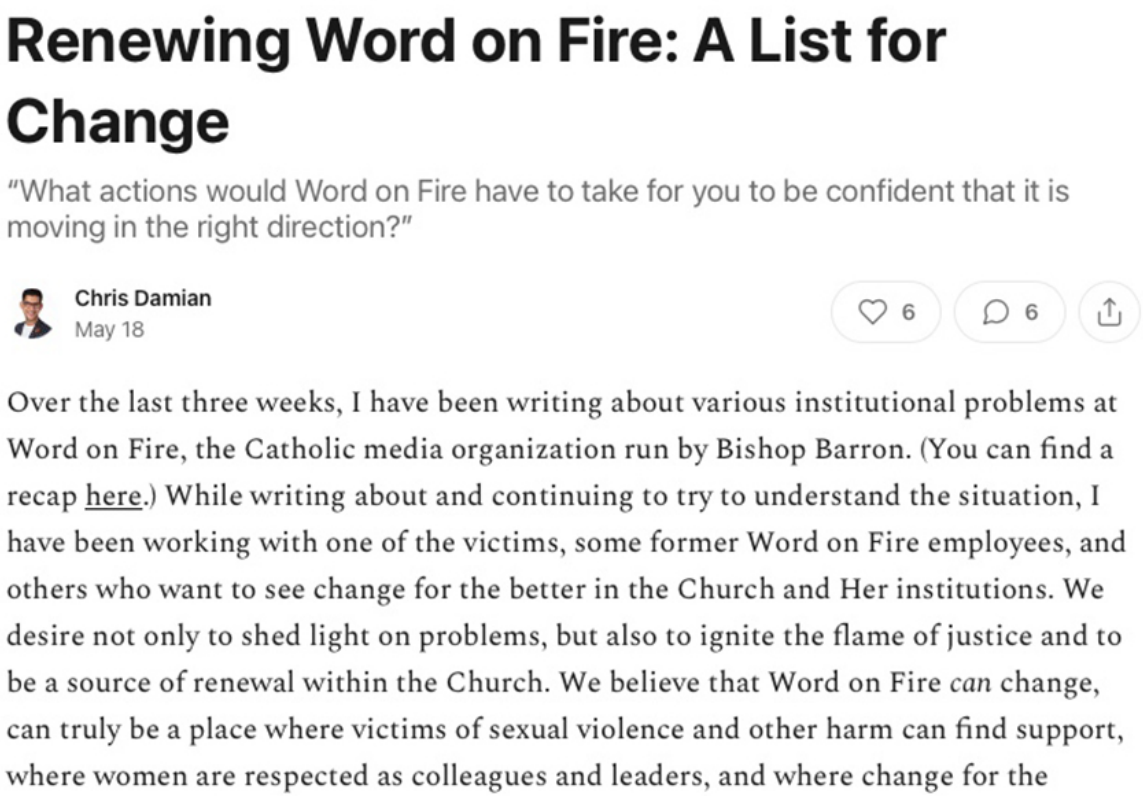
Rodriguez, Gloor's lawyer, accused the Orange County woman of pressing her grievances against Gloor into his workplace and threatening "to go to the tabloids and create a scandal" if Word on Fire did not "deal" with Gloor.

A Word on Fire spokesman said the purported social media post accelerated the announcement of Gloor's firing to him and the staff, but that the board of directors' subcommittee had already decided to fire him.

While Barron defends his handling of the allegations against Gloor, the Orange County woman who presented her evidence and cooperated with the investigation said her initial reaction to Word on Fire's resolution was one of disappointment.

"We all went to [Word on Fire] thinking Bishop Barron is a good Catholic man. We went to the police, and then we went to him because we respected him," said the woman. "We wanted to go to him because I cared and because we didn't want anything else to continue. We didn't want it to happen to other women. After seeing the transcript, it shows there is a toxic culture."

Word on Fire's approach to the Gloor investigation has garnered criticisms across the Catholic media sphere. Catholic blogger Chris Damian, who was the first to write about the turmoil in a series of blog posts in late April and early May, criticized Barron for apparently showing more concern for Gloor than his alleged victims.



Renewing Word on Fire: A List for Change

"What actions would Word on Fire have to take for you to be confident that it is moving in the right direction?"

Chris Damian
May 18

6 6

Over the last three weeks, I have been writing about various institutional problems at Word on Fire, the Catholic media organization run by Bishop Barron. (You can find a recap here.) While writing about and continuing to try to understand the situation, I have been working with one of the victims, some former Word on Fire employees, and others who want to see change for the better in the Church and Her institutions. We desire not only to shed light on problems, but also to ignite the flame of justice and to be a source of renewal within the Church. We believe that Word on Fire *can* change, can truly be a place where victims of sexual violence and other harm can find support, where women are respected as colleagues and leaders, and where change for the

A screenshot of a May 18 blog post by Chris Damian titled “Renewing Word on Fire: A List for Change” (NCR screenshot)

Damian's blog posts prompted a scathing statement on May 6 from Word on Fire in which it defended Barron and said Damian had sought to defame the company and Barron. The statement also accused Word on Fire's former communications director, Will Sipling, who worked for the organization from March 2020 until November 2021, of illegally recording last October's Google meeting and being Damian's primary source in an attempt to take down the organization.

Reached by NCR, Sipling said "a good many things" in Word on Fire's "inflammatory" statement "are unsubstantiated and incorrect." Contrary to Word on Fire's May 6 statement, Sipling said he never stated that he intended to take down the organization.

He also said Word on Fire was wrong to say he and Damian were "promulgating deliberate untruths through false premises." Said Sipling: "There are no false

premises."

"The only conclusive thing about [the statement] is further proof of Barron's incompetence in handling the abuse carried out by two of his closest friends, Joe Gloor and Steve Grunow," Sipling said.

A spokesman for Word on Fire said the organization stands by its May 6 statement. Grunow did not respond to a request for comment on this story.

Elizabeth Scalia is one former Word on Fire staff member who has referred to the turmoil there on the record. After resigning her position as an editor-at-large on May 13, Scalia wrote a "goodbye" essay in which she said she hopes that the organization can address the concerns she had about its policies, procedures, communication, missionary vision and the lack of new work.

"It is my sincere wish that the tilted ship may yet be righted, and if Word on Fire ever fed you well, or helped you in your life of faith, I hope you will pray for its correction and flourishing, because the mission is still a very worthy one," Scalia wrote to her readers.

A version of this story appeared in the **June 10-23, 2022** print issue under the headline: Multiple resignations at Word on Fire.