



The closed Basilica of Lourdes is pictured May 8, 2020, in Lourdes, southwestern France. The Vatican came under pressure Tuesday, Dec. 6, 2022, to explain why it didn't prosecute a famous Jesuit artist and merely let his order restrict the priest's ministry following allegations that he abused his authority over adult women. Mosiacs by Rev. Marko Ivan Rupnik decorate several churches and chapels, including the Lourdes basilica. (AP Photo/Bob Edme, File)

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Vatican City — December 20, 2022

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A Vatican-appointed investigator who helped bring to light decades-old allegations of sexual and spiritual abuse against a famous Jesuit priest is calling for the hierarchs who hid his crimes to “humbly ask the world to forgive the scandal.”

In correspondence obtained Nov. 19, Bishop Daniele Libanori also said the claims of the women about Fr. Marko Ivan Rupnik were true and that they had “seen their lives ruined by the evil suffered and by the complicit silence” of the church.

Libanori penned the letter Nov. 18 to fellow priests after a remarkable week in which the Jesuit religious order of Pope Francis admitted that Rupnik, an artist whose mosaics grace churches and chapels around the world, had been excommunicated for having committed one of the most serious crimes in the church: using the confessional to absolve a woman with whom he had engaged in sexual activity.

The Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which handles sex abuse cases, declared the excommunication in May 2020 but lifted it that same month and then declined to prosecute him a year later when nine women came forward with other, related allegations. The Congregation, which is headed by Jesuits, said the cases were too old to prosecute.

Libanori, who is himself a Jesuit, uncovered the women’s stories when he was sent in 2019 by the Vatican to conduct an investigation into their troubled community in Slovenia amid complaints about their current leader.

Rupnik, who is Slovene, had helped found the Loyola Community of consecrated women in the 1980s, but was ordered to leave in 1993 for reasons that now appear related to allegations he sexually and spiritually abused the women under his spiritual care there.

Learning of the claims, Libanori urged the women to file formal complaints with the Vatican, resulting in the 2021 case that was ultimately shelved because it was deemed too old to prosecute.

Despite the early exile from Slovenia, Rupnik retained some supporters and a group of women followed him to Rome where he founded a hugely successful art and cultural study center — the Aletti Center, which has its own publishing imprint, Lipa Editions. Rupnik still enjoys a strong web of supporters, some of whom have sought to discredit the Slovene accusers by questioning their mental health, according to another piece of Libanori correspondence.

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“It’s ignoble to think of reducing responsibility and diminishing the evil by dismissing those who complain with summary judgments about their mental health or, worse, their seriousness,” Libanori wrote in a Dec. 4 letter to the Slovene community members. “If anything, this makes the responsibility of those who took advantage of them more serious.”

The Rupnik scandal has underscored the weaknesses in the Vatican’s abuse policies concerning spiritual and sexual abuse of adult women, and how powerful priests can often count on high-ranking support even after credible allegations against them are lodged.

Libanori’s correspondence evidences the same playbook used by other accused priests — Fr. Marcial Maciel and ex-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick for example -- who managed to discredit their accusers for decades by claiming they were unstable, out to hurt them or the church, or were merely spreading slanderous “calumnies.”

Libanori, who is also an auxiliary bishop of Rome, sought to set the record straight in the letter to Italian priests. While saying Rupnik deserves God's love and mercy, Libanori said his victims deserve to be believed, that the full truth must still come out and that those who protected Rupnik must step up.

“Wounded and offended people, who have seen their lives ruined by the evil suffered and by complicit silence, have the right to have their dignity even publicly restored now that everything has come to light,” Libanori wrote. “We the church have a duty to seriously examine our conscience, and those who are responsible must acknowledge it and humbly ask the world to forgive the scandal.”

The Jesuits, for their part, are asking any other potential victims to come forward with claims.

The Rupnik case appears to be another instance of a charismatic religious leader who helped found a new religious community, only to later be accused of abusing those under his spiritual sway. Francis has been cracking down on the unregulated explosion of such communities that blossomed after the Second Vatican Council and found favor under St. John Paul II.

Francis has launched countless investigations into individual communities, imposed outside leadership on them to implement reforms while making across-the-board term limits on governance positions in lay movements to try to prevent cults of personalities from forming.