News
News
Religious Life

Nicole Winfield

View Author Profile

The Associated Press

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Vatican City — February 9, 2023
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint



Sr. Véronique Margron (Provided photo)

The umbrella group of Catholic religious orders in France is demanding church authorities assume responsibility for horrific evidence of sexual, spiritual and psychological abuse in L'Arche, once a preeminent lay community dedicated to people with developmental disabilities.

Sr. Véronique Margron, president of the conference of religious orders in France, issued a devastating analysis Feb. 9 of the implications of the findings of a two-year investigation into L'Arche, its founder, Jean Vanier, and his spiritual guru, Fr. Thomas Philippe.

The 437-page report, published Jan. 30, offers a detailed forensic study of how Vanier created a secretive "sect" within the heart of the Catholic Church designed entirely to feed his sexual appetites through "collective delirium" and mystical-sexual practices that he justified on spiritual grounds.

Using seduction, manipulation, secrecy and coercion, the charismatic Vanier initiated as many as 25 young women into the "mystico-sexual practices" of the sect within L'Arche, convincing them of his sanctity while abusing them sexually and spiritually, the report found.

Advertisement

In a Feb. 9 statement, Margron said the report prompted questions about the Catholic Church's "entire ecclesial, theological and pastoral culture, since it has been the breeding ground for abuse, manipulation, aggression, lies and even death."

She said the report also laid bare how secrecy, and "the great silence" by the Vatican had enabled the "gnostic delusions" of Vanier and Philippe, as well as their impunity and abuse.

Philippe, who was subjected to a canonical trial for abuse and false mysticism in the 1950s, died in 1993. Varnier died in 2019; the following year, L'Arche came out with a preliminary report detailing the abuses he committed as founder of L'Arche.

The organization commissioned the more ample report from six researchers in different disciplines — history, sociology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis and theology. They conducted 119 interviews and had access to church archives, including from the then Holy Office investigation into Philippe.

The findings are the latest to document cases of sexual and spiritual abuse of adult women by priests or charismatic lay leaders, which the Vatican has long dismissed as mere "boundary violations" by otherwise chaste men.

Recently, in an interview with The Associated Press, Pope Francis acknowledged how women can be abused by these "seducing" personalities who manipulate their victims on spiritual grounds to take advantage of them sexually.