News

A cube in primary colors has phrases like, "Be the first to love," "Share the other's joy or hurt,

This is the cube of love, a children's activity that summarizes some core principles of the Focolare movement's lifestyle. (CNS photo/courtesy Susanne Janssen)

Carol Glatz

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The Focolare movement has published its first report on cases of abuse received between 2014 and 2022, as well as its updated and planned measures to better and more quickly handle accusations, promote a "safeguarding culture" and offer reparation to victims.

The changes include a clear set of new procedures for reporting and investigating allegations, and possible sanctions for violations -- all of which will go into effect "ad experimentum" May 1. The experimental period will end June 30, 2024.

The report, published at focolare.org March 31, was part of "a public account of information regarding the reports we have received and the measures we have taken as the Focolare movement in response to the scourge of the sexual abuse of children and vulnerable adults and the abuse of conscience, spiritual abuse and the abuse of authority regarding adults," the movement said in a press release.

The lay movement was founded by the late Chiara Lubich in Italy in 1943 as a Catholic movement promoting unity and fraternity. Headquartered outside of Rome, it has about 120,000 members, made up of lay and ordained people, in 194 countries. Another 1.5 million people are involved with the movement or "sympathize with it," according to its website.

According to the new report, titled, "Towards a safeguarding culture encompassing the whole person," between 2014 and 2022 the movement's international safeguarding commission received a total of 61 reports of sexual abuse against children or vulnerable adults perpetrated by 66 people -- the majority of whom were men (63) and lay people (53), which included 32 consecrated lay people who took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

Of those 66 people accused of sexual abuse against a minor, the movement: sanctioned nine individuals; dismissed 20, relieving them of their vows; reported nine people to "judicial authorities," not specifying if they were civil or church authorities; suspended six as they await judgment; and "closed" 12 cases due to "insufficient grounds to proceed with an investigation."

In addition, between 2018 and Dec. 31, 2022, the commission received 22 reports of some form of abuse against an adult, indicating there were at least 31 perpetrators with more people in the process of being identified because the abuse involved "the behavior of groups of members" not just individuals, the report said.

Of those 31 individuals reported to "have abused," it said, 28 were consecrated lay people, of whom 19 were women. Four of the 31 individuals were subjected to sanctions, the cases against four people were dismissed for insufficient grounds and the remaining 14 cases were still pending.

In 2013, the movement established a central international commission and local commissions for the wellbeing and safeguarding of children (CO.BE.TU). The next year, it published its "Guidelines for the wellbeing and the safeguarding of children," established a safeguarding supervisory board and created a handbook and safeguarding training course for members working with children.

In 2015, it created another commission for receiving reports of all forms of alleged abuse toward adult members, including abuses of conscience and authority, and spiritual abuse. However, according to the March 31 report, its data on abuse toward adults dates only from 2018. This body then merged with the central commission for

safeguarding children to become one entity in 2021.

This "first account of the measures of prevention, investigation, transparency, training and change, undertaken by the movement, to combat these crimes," the press release said, comes one year after a 100-page report of an independent investigation was published by GCPS, a U.K.-based consulting firm specializing in helping organizations improve the safety of children and "at risk" groups.

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That report, released March 30, 2022, was commissioned by the Focolare movement in 2020 to look into allegations of the sexual abuse of minors by just one of its consecrated lay members, identified as JMM, whose crimes had become public in the French media that year, and into how the movement had responded.

The GCPS report detailed how JMM had groomed and manipulated his victims and their parents, taking advantage of his "status as a consecrated lay person." He also successfully manipulated "his own organizational management, which for years had partial knowledge" of his abuse and protected him for decades.

The Focolare movement dismissed him in 2016 after whistleblowers contacted the movement in France, the French bishops' conference and the then-Pontifical Council for the Laity at the Vatican. While in police custody, JMM had admitted to being sexually attracted to young boys and to touching the teen victim who raised a complaint to a French court in 1994. But the court dismissed the sexual assault charge in 1995 because of the statute of limitations, and the charge of attempted rape was dropped because of a lack of evidence.

The victim did win a civil suit for damages in 1998 since JMM did admit to certain facts and a court had recognized the evidence, the GCPS report said, and the movement, with approval from its headquarters, gave JMM the money as "a loan" to pay the damages.

"JMM is not a unique case in the history of the movement and in similar ways other situations have not been dealt with," the report said. The report was commissioned to investigate only JMM and those responsible for him, however, witnesses revealed other abuse and problems.

"It is important for Focolare to recognize and acknowledge and accept the dark side in a movement that wants to represent unity and harmony and seeks to create a 'family,'" it said. Most sexual abuse happens in the family, followed by the church, then schools, camps and sports, it said, and the Focolare movement is active in all these areas, "mixing families, church, youth activities and teachings."

"The pyramidal structure of the movement, its mantra of obedience and unity has certainly contributed to the systemic failure to deal with not only the case against JMM but also other cases," it said.

This "pyramidal system," it said, means "very few people are in the know and try to deal with issues informally until this is not possible anymore and they then need to address the problem urgently and in a disorganized way."

"There is no doubt the Focolare movement has taken significant steps to change the situation," it said, noting the "strong commitment from leaders to ensure the movement is a safe place." The report provided in-depth recommendations that the movement was seeking to adopt step-by-step as seen with its March 31 document.

However, the GCPS report said, "there are a significant number of people in the movement who do not feel safe and, in spite of the encouragement to do so, have not reported their concerns."

When presenting their new procedures and measures March 31, the Focolare movement reiterated its "pain and shame," asked victims for forgiveness and said it was determined "to combat this crime" of abuse.