Vatican
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Pope Francis meets with Maria Campatelli, director of the Centro Aletti, at the Vatican Sept. 1

Pope Francis meets with Maria Campatelli, director of the Centro Aletti, at the Vatican Sept. 15, 2023. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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Women who say they were abused by a once-prominent Jesuit artist said Sept. 19 they had been revictimized by his superiors, saying Pope Francis' recent gestures and an apparent effort to exonerate him publicly showed church pledges of "zero tolerance" were just a "publicity stunt."

In an open letter published on an Italian survivor advocate site, the women lashed out at a declaration from the Vicariate of Rome, which Francis nominally heads as Bishop of Rome and recently tightened his grip over. The Vicariate reported Sept. 18 that it had uncovered "seriously anomalous procedures" used in the Vatican investigation into Fr. Marko Ivan Rupnik.

The Slovene priest, whose mosaics decorate churches and basilicas around the globe, was declared excommunicated by the Vatican in May 2020 and was kicked out of the Jesuit order this summer after he was accused by several adult women of sexual, psychological and spiritual abuses.

After the allegations came to light in the Italian media last year, the Vicariate of Rome conducted its own investigation into the art and study center that Rupnik founded in Rome, the Centro Aletti. The Vicariate reported Sept. 18 that its investigation determined that the center had a "healthy community life," free of any problems, and said its members had suffered from the public airing of the claims against their founder, Rupnik.

The center has long stood by Rupnik, with current leader Maria Campatelli saying in June that the claims against him were "defamatory and unproven" and amounted to a form of mediatic "lynching" against the Slovene priest and his art center.

Francis last week had a well-publicized, private audience with Campatelli, and photographs distributed by the Vatican showed them sitting together at the pope's desk in his formal library in the Apostolic Palace, a place reserved for his official audiences.

In the letter, five women who made claims against Rupnik said that Francis' audience with Campatelli and the report by his Vicariate "leave us speechless, with no voice to cry out our dismay, our scandal."

"In these two events, which are not accidental, even in their succession in time, we recognize that the church cares nothing for the victims and those seeking justice; and that the ‘zero tolerance on abuse in the church' was just a publicity campaign, which was instead only followed by often covert actions, which instead supported and covered up the abusers," they wrote.

The letter, posted on italychurchtoo.org, noted that Rupnik's alleged victims wrote to the pope four different letters, and never received a response much less an audience.

"The victims are left with a voiceless cry of new abuse," the letter concluded, signed by five women whose names until Tuesday had been known only to the church authorities who had received their claims.

The Rupnik case has been problematic for the pope, the Vatican and the Jesuits from the start, because of suggestions the priest was given favorable treatment by a Vatican dominated by Jesuits and unwilling to sanction abuse of adult women or the "false mysticism" they say Rupnik practiced.

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In a January interview with The Associated Press, Francis denied he had intervened in any way in the case other than a procedural decision. He expressed surprise and dismay at the claims against such a prominent artist, but appeared to also understand the abuse dynamic the women described.

"A personality who seduces, who manages your conscience, this creates a relationship of vulnerability, and so you're imprisoned," he said Jan. 24.

In the end, Rupnik was only formally sanctioned by the Vatican for one canonical crime: using the confessional to absolve a woman with whom he had engaged in sexual activity. He incurred an excommunication decree that was lifted within two weeks.

It was that claim that the Rome Vicariate's investigator, Fr. Giacomo Incitti, found problematic, determining there had been anomalies in the procedures used and that there were "well-founded doubts" about the original request for his excommunication. The Vicariate said that Incitti's report had been forwarded to the competent authorities.

In addition to support from his Centro Aletti, Rupnik also enjoyed high-ranking support, including from the leadership of the Rome Vicariate. The statement on Sept. 18, seemingly discrediting the women's claims, suggested a concerted effort to rehabilitate him even after the Jesuits determined the women's allegations against him were credible enough to warrant kicking him out of the order.

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