Vatican
Vatican News
An older white man wearing glasses, a vest, and a collared shirt looks at the camera

Fr. Marko Rupnik, recently expelled from the Jesuit order, is pictured in a 2015 photo in Rome. (OSV News photo/Cristian Gennari, KNA)

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A famous priest-artist who was thrown out of the Jesuits after being accused of sexual, spiritual and psychological abuse of women has been accepted into a diocese in his native Slovenia, the latest twist in a case that has implicated the pope and laid bare the limits of the Vatican’s in-house legal system.

The Diocese of Koper confirmed in a statement sent to The Associated Press on Oct. 26 that the Fr. Marko Ivan Rupnik was accepted as a priest there in August.

Rupnik was taken in because he had been expelled from the Jesuits and because the diocese hadn't received any documents showing that Rupnik had "been found guilty of the alleged abuses before either an ecclesiastical tribunal or civil court," it said.

The statement cited the Universal Declaration on Human Rights' provision on the presumption of innocence and right to a defense for anyone accused of a crime.

Rupnik, whose mosaics decorate churches and basilicas around the globe, was declared excommunicated by the Vatican in May 2020. The Jesuit order kicked him out this summer after several adult women accused him of sexual, psychological and spiritual abuses dating back 30 years.

The scandal has been a headache for the Vatican and Pope Francis himself due to suspicions Rupnik received favorable treatment from the Holy See since Francis is a Jesuit and other Jesuits head the sex crimes office that investigated the priest and declined to prosecute him for abuse.

After conducting their own investigation, the Jesuit order announced in June that it found the women’s claims to be "very highly credible" but the Vatican's canonical norms in force at the time of the alleged abuse precluded harsher punishment for old cases involving the abuse of adults.

The Catholic Church has long responded to women who report priests for abusing their authority by blaming the women for seducing the churchmen, portraying them as mentally unstable or minimizing the event as a mere "mistake" or "boundary violation" by an otherwise holy priest.

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The Jesuits said they had kicked Rupnik out not because of the abuse claims, but because of his "stubborn refusal to observe the vow of obedience." The Jesuits had exhorted Rupnik to atone for his misconduct and enter into a process of reparation with his victims, but he refused.

While Francis' role in the Rupnik scandal has come into question, the pontiff insisted in a Jan. 24 interview with The Associated Press that he had only intervened procedurally in the case, though he also said he opposed waiving the statute of limitations for old abuse cases involving adults.

More recently, Francis was seen as being part of an apparent attempt by Rupnik's supporters to rehabilitate the priest's image. In a widely publicized audience, Francis received a close collaborator and strong defender of Rupnik's who has denounced what she called a media "lynching" of him.

In a statement last month, the Vicariate of Rome, which Francis heads, cast doubt on the Vatican's lone punishment of Rupnik – a 2020 declaration of excommunication that was removed two weeks later. Women who alleged they were abused by Rupnik said the statement revictimized them.

Usually, when a priest moves from one diocese to another, or joins a diocese after leaving a religious order, the process takes years. According to canon law, it also requires "appropriate testimonials … concerning the cleric's life, morals, and studies," from the priest’s previous superior.

Neither the Vatican, nor the Jesuits nor the Vicariate of Rome responded to requests for comment Oct. 26 about Rupnik's transfer to Koper, or whether any documentation about his case had been sent to Slovenia from Rome.

The diocesan statement provided to the AP differed from the one originally printed by Catholic media in Slovenia and included a reference to the diocese not receiving documentation about any abuse convictions.