Vatican
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A mosaic featuring a woman wearing a white coif and black veil with arms around flames

St. Edith Stein is depicted in a detail from a mosaic by Fr. Marko Rupnik in the Redemptoris Mater Chapel at the Vatican. It took 10 months from first reports on the case and first victims' testimonies, removing Rupnik from Jesuit order and a public outrage to reopen the case of Slovenian mosaic-artist. (OSV News photo/courtesy Centro Aletti)

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It took 10 months for the Vatican to reopen Fr. Marko Rupnik's case -- from the first reports on the case of Slovenian mosaic artist in December 2022 and the first alleged victims' testimonies at that time, to dismissal of the priest from the Jesuit order in July, to public outrage after his incardination into a Slovenian diocese.

A victim of another well-known charismatic priest said the reason the church neglected the Rupnik case for so long is simple: It still doesn't listen to vulnerable adults.

"It didn't surprise me at all, because that's how it works. Unfortunately, in the church, where we already have some procedures worked out regarding harmed children, … it feels like we don't have any procedures worked out regarding adults harmed in the church, and it's still such a taboo topic," said Weronika (whose name has been changed to protect her identity), who was repeatedly sexually and spiritually abused as an adult by Dominican Fr. Pawel M. in Poland.

The friar's name cannot be revealed according to Polish law, as he is serving a three-year sentence for raping and abusing a nun, while Weronika's case had reached the statute of limitations by the time it was reported to the prosecutor.

The case of Pawel was one of the biggest blows to the church in Poland amid its sexual abuse crisis, with the Dominican order starting the first-ever Polish independent commission in March 2021, documenting the actions of their brother. Those actions included sexual and spiritual abuse of participants in a youth ministry he ran in the early 2000s and his abuse of a nun in 2010s; the friar was never punished for his previous abuse, which allowed him to perpetrate further abuse of others.

Pawel was a popular priest, but when he took over a youth ministry in southwestern Poland's Wroclaw, a cult-like atmosphere quickly formed. He created a closed circle of people who fully trusted him and then -- once the unconditional trust was built -- he started to sexually abuse young female students who were participants in the ministry.

"He was beating me until I was unconscious and then raped me," Weronika, who was 20 at the time, told OSV News, adding she was told these actions were "God's will." The Dominican also heard the confessions of his victims, during which he excused his own actions but said the young women were committing sexual sins. This was the thinking of the friar's superiors in looking at Pawel's actions -- that he sinned but did not commit a crime, mostly because the women were "adults."

"I think it's very common to look at those hurt in the church as adults not as victims, but as those who encouraged criminals to harm them. That is to say, we are actually not those who have been wronged but those that are complicit in that harm. It is so hard to understand that an adult can be harmed, manipulated, destroyed, deprived of their own thinking," Weronika said.

"It usually starts with the abuse of trust and exploitation of spiritual superiority and hierarchical position by the clergy. A kind of subjugation of another person takes place," Barbara Smolinska, psychologist and victims therapist, told Wiez, a Polish Catholic magazine that uncovered multiple cases of sexual abuse, including the one by Pawel.

"Trust" in the abuser is a key word here, Smolinska said. "The trust with which a young person places his confessor, spiritual director … weakens the critical sense, blinds a person in a way so the victim turns off defense mechanisms."

One of the alleged victims of Rupnik -- previously known as Anna, but who revealed her real name, Gloria Branciani, on Oct. 30 in Domani Italian media outlet -- said in an interview published by Domani Dec. 18, 2022, and republished by The Pillar in English: "I was bewildered: on the one hand, I wanted to run away; on the other, Father Marko encouraged me by telling me that I could experience that reality because I was special and it was a gift that the Lord gave only to us -- that only with me could he experience, even physically, belonging to God without possession, in freedom, in the image of Trinitarian love."

Branciani said her abuse was a "descent into hell," and recalled how "Father Marko at first slowly and gently infiltrated my psychological and spiritual world by appealing to my uncertainties and frailties while using my relationship with God to push me to have sexual experiences with him." She described Rupnik's request "for more and more erotic games in his studio at the Collegio del Gesù in Rome, while painting or after the celebration of the Eucharist or confession."

"We must remember that it happens in a huge dependence with the person who harms," said Weronika, "and a huge dependence with the person who harms also raises a huge fear."

"Unfortunately, here in these cases of religious communities what is always used is your faith, your relationship with God, and you are led in such a way that you feel guilty and intimidated all the time, and in fear not so much of the abuser, but of God -- that you are not doing something that God expects of you," she told OSV News.

"It is incredibly difficult to understand that if someone on whom you depend becomes your abuser, then your whole life, in this case spiritual life, is dependent on him," Weronika said, adding that oftentimes she was asked "why didn't you say no? But the truth is -- punishment for saying no would be enormous. In my case, he

[Pawel] could beat me to death."

"We live in the times when it's really easy to destroy a person. And we also live in the times when it's easy to become God on earth, and that is the case of Marko Rupnik," Weronika said. In those circumstances, she continued, "when such a spiritual, charismatic leader appears, the percentage of people harmed by him is much smaller than the percentage of his 'worshippers.' " That's why a person who is wronged, she said, "collides with a huge misunderstanding that could be dismissed in a few words: 'You want to destroy such a wonderful priest.' "

Even though Weronika does not know Rupnik's alleged victims, she feels their pain and appealed to Pope Francis: "Holy Father, listen to us! Finally hear us, the adults who were wronged!"

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She said she thinks Francis "made certain mistakes" in the case of Rupnik, "mistakes" she assumes were driven by a fraternal relationship: "Yes, it's often people we had as friends, we respected them, they were close to us, we admired them, but all of a sudden they turn out to be criminals. It doesn't mean that our friendship should end. But it also doesn't mean we can't stand behind someone who was harmed by them," she said.

"In justice and in love for the people he hurt, the church should not protect the abuser," Weronika said.

"Personally, it seems to me that Pope Francis stopped thinking about people who were wronged, and was more guided by his heart to the person he believed in -- and that seems to me was Father Rupnik," she said.

"I love Pope Francis, but he may have made mistakes in this case," she said.

She commented on what the newly released synthesis report on the just-ended Synod on Synodality says with regard to abuse: "Integral to a synodal Church is ensuring a culture of transparency and respect for the procedures established for the protection of minors and vulnerable people. It is necessary to develop further structures dedicated to the prevention of abuse." Either there is justice for the victims in such cases as Rupnik's, Weronika said, or she will believe it is only "words,

words, words."

Domani reported Oct. 30 that the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors tried to reach out to victims and that an online meeting was organized with some of Rupnik's victims Oct. 21.

"There is no need to hear the victims at this point, since we have all been heard several times and the only thing missing is justice," a victim told Domani after the meeting.

For Weronika, the fact that the friar who hurt her is now in prison is an element of justice that was fundamental for her healing. "I don't envy a single day in prison. But it was worth the fight even though I had to scratch my wounds to testify," she told OSV News.

"For years I was this one sheep that no one went after," she said, "and finally I was listened to -- but I had to be listened to by a journalist and only then the church listened. Isn't it the same with Father Rupnik? We needed a scandal so that the case moves forward, and this is a very bitter lesson."

F.r Jan Dohnalik, a Polish canon lawyer, told Wiez that the church recognizes "vulnerable adults as a separate category of those abused and granted them legal canonical protection."

He said however that "in the church, this awareness is still in its initial stages, but it is clearly developing."

"This should be made clear to church superiors. They have a duty to respond to these cases -- and they can be held accountable for fulfilling this duty in the future," Dohnalik said, pointing especially to two church documents, Francis' 2016 motu proprio, "As a Loving Mother," and his 2019 "Vos Estis Lux Mundi."

He expanded on canon law that allows for the removal of bishops and superiors for serious negligence or "lack of diligence" in the exercise of their office, in particular with regard to the sexual abuse of minors.

"The injustice is to a particular person, and until it is corrected, there is no justice. It is therefore necessary to make reparation to the wronged, to repair the damage done," Dohnalik told Wiez.

"Let's not allow people to further rob others of their lives, because that life can't be undone," Weronika told OSV News.

"No one will give us a second life," she said, appealing to church superiors. "So be just. Lift your head up and do justice to the adult victims of priests."

"The abusers have stolen an image of God from us, so we are robbed from God," she said. "But when you think there is nothing left, you realize you are still alive, and that it is worth fighting for, to have at least a part of this life back."