News



A devotee is seen in Immaculate Conception Cathedral in Concepcion, Bolivia, one of many historic Jesuit missionary sites within the country declared a World Heritage Site in 2019. (OSV News/David Mercado, Reuters)



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A Spanish Jesuit has been discovered to have documented his abuse of hundreds of Indigenous girls while serving as a missionary in rural Bolivia — atrocities which the Society of Jesus has known about since at least 2019 and did not immediately report to the civil authorities.

Jesuit Father Luis María Roma wrote in a diary of abusing girls, whom he often lured to a river and photographed inappropriately, according to the Spanish newspaper El País. The Jesuit province in Bolivia compiled a report on Roma's acts in 2019, but withheld it from prosecutors, according to El País, which obtained a copy of the priest's diary and the Jesuit's investigation.

Roma died in August 2019, shortly before the report's completion. El País published a notarized confession by the priest signed in May 2019, which read, "I got carried away, in some situations, by libidinous acts, inappropriate for a religious person, with girls from eight to 11 years old."

In a June 16 statement, the Jesuits expressed "deep regret" that "those who were in charge of addressing the complaints of sexual abuse from girls, boys and adolescents and acting on behalf of the victims were negligent, indolent and disastrous, without putting victims at the center of their attention. Those who acted in this way must be held responsible for their actions in handling such situations, as established by the Bolivian justice system within the framework of due process."

The statement continued, "The current authorities in charge of the government of the Society of Jesus in Bolivia have the moral obligation not to act as was done in the past."

The Jesuits urged prosecutors to "reopen" the case into Roma and "those considered appropriate, given the evidence of the testimony of victims and the material

collected in the police raids, to establish the responsibilities of those who may have known the facts and not have acted in accordance with the law."

The revelations of Roma's documented depravity deepened the scandal of clerical sexual abuse in the Bolivia province of the Jesuit order, where accusations of crimes committed against children by missionary priests have mounted and Jesuit superiors are charged with covering up the offenses.

In 2023, El País published the contents of another diary kept by Father Alfonso Pedrajas, another Spanish Jesuit working in Bolivia, who described abusing at least 85 victims. Pedrajas died in 2009 without facing the justice system.

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Details of Pedrajas' diary generated outrage in Bolivia — with President Luis Arce calling on the Vatican to open its archives and threatening to scrutinize the entry of foreign priests. The Bolivian bishops' conference subsequently announced enhanced protocols for the protection of minors and for addressing accusations of clerical sexual abuse.

Two former Jesuit provincials, Father Ramón Alaix and Father Jesús Marcos Recolons, have been charged with covering up the crimes committed by Pedrajas.

The Pedrajas scandal prompted victims of clerical abuse to come forward. El País said it received information on Roma — often called Lucho — after its initial investigation into Pedrajas.

The newspaper also reported the Jesuits provided its report into Roma to the civil authorities after details on Pedrajas' crimes were published.

Roma was born in Barcelona, Spain, in 1935 and joined the Jesuits upon turning 18. He was sent to Bolivia two years later. He worked as a teacher and supervisor in Jesuit schools, according to El País, becoming subdirector of its educational institutions.

He also served as vice provincial at the Jesuit curia in La Paz, the administrative capital, in the 1980s. El País reported the first signs of predatory behavior became

known then as Roma regularly traveled on weekends to an Indigenous village, where he "sexually abused dozens of girls," the paper wrote.

His diary documented a period from 1994 to 2001, when he worked as a missionary in Charagua, an indigenous Guaraní community in southeastern Bolivia. Roma followed a "modus operandi" of many abusers, according to El País, in which he lured the children with gifts or candy and took them to a nearby river.

"On other occasions, he led the group to his room, where he locked them in there and played children's movies or films on the life of Jesus Christ. … He took advantage of the opportunity to abuse them and film or photograph them," El País said.

Roma also "stole alms" and "diverted funds" sent for Jesuit projects in Charagua, where he served as parish priest, to pay for the gifts. Some of the money paid for a "sidekick," who worked as his driver and who El País identified as the former resident of an orphanage where Roma worked. "The hypothesis is that his role was vital for Roma to abuse minors," according to El País.

The diversion of funds did not go unnoticed by superiors, El País wrote.

Roma took photos or filmed more than 100 girls — at least 70 of whom he identified by name. El País spoke with a 32-year-old victim identified as Susana, who said, "Parents (in Charagua) blindly trusted him because he was the padre at the local church. He took us swimming at the river and took photos of us."

Roma remained in Charagua until 2005, when he was suddenly moved to the city of Sucre. He died in August 2019.

The then Jesuit provincial, Alaix, said in the Jesuit's report, "There's nothing to suggest problems with girls. The accusation is that he stole from the community."

Jesuit colleagues and a cleaner discovered some of the photos in Roma's room in Sucre and on his computer but didn't immediately report what they found, according to El País.

When investigators entered his room, El País reported, "Photographs of dozens of

half-naked girls appeared in every corner: between the pages of books, in his personal agenda, inside the album covers, in his desk drawers, on the hard drive of his computer."