News



French priest Abbe Pierre prepares to drive away after making various speeches to volunteer helpers who help the homeless in the streets of Paris, on Feb. 2, 1954. Several women have accused late French priest Abbe Pierre of sexual assault or harassment, his foundation said Wednesday July 17, 2024. Abbe Pierre was one of France's most beloved public figures and a lifelong advocate for the homeless. (AP, File)

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Vatican City — July 18, 2024
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A legendary French priest and a lifelong advocate of the homeless has been accused of committing acts that would amount to “sexual assault or sexual harassment,” his foundation said Wednesday, in the latest instance of a Catholic spiritual leader facing allegations of abusing his power to harm women.

Abbé Pierre, who died in 2007, was one of France’s most beloved public figures. The founder of the international Emmaus Community for the poor, Abbé Pierre had served as part of France’s conscience since the 1950s, when he persuaded Parliament to pass a law — still on the books — forbidding landlords to evict tenants during winter.

Several women have accused the late priest of sexual assault or harassment between the end of the 1970s and 2005, his foundation said in a statement. It explained that it is making public the allegations of seven women, including one who was a minor at the time, after reviewing the report of an expert firm that specializes in violence prevention and was commissioned to listen to women's testimonies and analyze them.

The women reported unsolicited kissing and touching, as well as inappropriate sexual comments and propositions, according to the report from the Groupe Egaé firm.

"The Emmaus Community is making public the acts that may amount to sexual assault or sexual harassment, committed by Abbé Pierre," the statement said. It added that several other women had “suffered comparable acts” of sexual abuse but were unable to be heard. Some had died, some could not be contacted and others declined to be interviewed.

The alleged victims were employees, volunteers with the foundation or some of its member organizations, or young women in Abbé Pierre's personal entourage, the statement said.

The foundation has set up a confidential system for other potential victims to come forward, for "collecting testimonies and providing support to people who were victims of or witnessed unacceptable behavior on the part of Abbé Pierre," the statement said.

The Vatican doesn't usually comment on individual cases of alleged abuse and didn't immediately respond when asked about Abbé Pierre.

In 2021, an independent commission on sexual abuse in the Catholic Church estimated that some 330,000 children were sexually abused over 70 years by priests or other church-related figures in France.

The allegations against Abbé Pierre are the latest in a series of cases of Catholic spiritual giants accused of abusing their power and authority to take sexual advantage of the women under their spiritual sway.

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France has recently had to contend with revelations about another beloved 20th century Catholic figure, Jean Vanier, who founded the L'Arche federation in the 1960s to care for people with intellectual disabilities. Recently, L'Arche commissioned investigations that found the late Vanier perverted Catholic doctrine about Jesus and Mary to justify his sexual compulsions to abuse women.

Prior to that were revelations of serial sexual abuse of adults in religious communities founded by two French brothers, the Rev. Thomas Philippe and Rev. Marie-Dominique Philippe, called L'Eau Vive and Community of Saint Jean, respectively. Thomas Philippe was a spiritual father to Vanier and allegedly initiated Vanier into his mystical-sexual practices at L'Eau Vive.

More recently, the Vatican and the Jesuit religious order have been contending with the scandal over the famous ex-Jesuit artist, Rev. Marko Rupnik, who has been accused by more than 20 women of spiritual, psychological and sexual abuse going back decades.

The Vatican reopened the Rupnik case after an international outcry that the priest, whose mosaics decorate basilicas and shrines around the world, received favorable treatment from the Jesuits including Pope Francis. Rupnik hasn't responded to the allegations, but the Jesuits kicked him out of the order last year after finding the women's claims were "very highly credible."

"Allegation after allegation, secular investigation after another clearly shows that no institution knew more and no institution has done less to help victims," said Mike McDonnell, communications director of the U.S.-based clergy abuse survivor group SNAP. "We can't help but think about the victims who have yet to come forward."

The Vatican has long refused to take action against charismatic spiritual leaders abusing their power to sexually harm women, making a clear distinction between abuse of minors and adults. The church has long insisted that any sexual activity between a priest and an adult woman is sinful but consensual, and has tended to blame the woman for seducing an otherwise holy priest.

The church has had to rethink that dynamic in the #MeToo era and acknowledge that free consent may not be possible given the imbalanced power differentials between priest and parishioner or nun.