News



A worshipper prays in Immaculate Conception Cathedral in Concepcion, Bolivia, Sept. 2, 2019. The Bolivia province of the Society of Jesus failed to follow instructions from the Jesuit curia in Rome by allegedly not publicly disclosing the findings of an investigation into a pedophile priest, compensating abuse victims and making public the name of the aggressor, the Spanish newspaper El País reported July 22, 2024. (OSV News/David Mercado, Reuters)



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La Paz, Bolivia — July 25, 2024

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The Bolivia province of the Society of Jesus failed to follow instructions from the Jesuit curia in Rome by allegedly not publicly disclosing the findings of an investigation into a pedophile priest, deepening a series of clerical sexual abuse scandals engulfing the order in the South American country.

In 2019, the Bolivia province investigated Father Luis María Roma — who documented in a diary his sexual abuse at least 70 girls — and sent its report to Rome. The curia told the Bolivian province in an email to offer reparations to the victims and publicize details of the case, including the perpetrator's name, according to an investigation by the Spanish newspaper El País. The curia also allegedly counseled keeping the diary confidential, El País reported July 22.

The Bolivia province ignored all advice from the Jesuit curia except one — to keep the diary confidential. El País reported its existence in June 2024, along with the Jesuits' investigation into Roma. But the Bolivia province sat on its internal investigation into Roma, not sharing it with Bolivian authorities for three years. Nor did it make reparations to the victims, according to El País.

The latest discovery of disregarded instructions raised questions of clerical abuse cases being suppressed by the Jesuits as details emerge of monstrous crimes committed by priests against children — with the perpetrators documenting details of their depravity in diaries and photographs.

Two former Jesuit provincials have been charged with covering up the crimes of another Jesuit, Father Alfonso Pedrajas, whose diary — obtained by El País and published in 2023 — contained admissions that he sexually abused at least 85 children, while working as an educator. Pedrajas died in 2009 without facing justice.

Roma, like Pedrajas, was born in Spain and moved to Bolivia, where he became subdirector of Jesuit schools. While working as a parish priest in Charagua, an Indigenous Guaraní village, between 1995 and 2004, he lured girls to a nearby river or his living quarters, where he took inappropriate photos, according to El País. The Spanish paper said he could have abused over a 100 victims.

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Roma died in 2019 and confessed in a notarized statement that year that he abused children, according to El País. Roma's crimes came to the attention of the Jesuit's Bolivia province in 2019 after being alerted to the images by Spanish news agency EFE, but only provided the information to Bolivian authorities in 2023, according to El País.

The Bolivian Jesuits have expressed regret for their handling of Roma’s case and said in a June 2024 statement, "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."

A spokesperson for the Bolivian Jesuits referred to the June statement when asked for comment.

El País obtained an email dated Feb. 25, 2020, from Jesuit Father Claudio Paul, adviser to the superior general of the Jesuits and regional assistant for South Latin America for the then-provincial, Jesuit Father Ignacio Suñol.

In the email, Father Paul outlined steps for the Bolivian province to follow. The steps included the Bolivian provincial informing community superiors on details of the case: "There was a complaint, it was investigated, the result was the conformation of the complaint, the findings were sent to the curia and they have sent it to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith."

Father Paul, acting on behalf of Rome-based curia of the Jesuit order, asked that the information about the accused Jesuit "be published and the possibility will be opened for victims to come forward, who will be offered the opportunity for psychological therapy as a form of reparation."

The email counseled making the information public via Jesuit communications channels, including its new agency and radio stations.

It also recommended preparing a reparations plan "to address possible claims," drawing on advice from the Chilean Jesuit Province -- at that time one of the Latin American countries where the abuse scandal had already broken out.

"It would fundamentally be about offering the possibility of psychological therapy to victims who come forward. It would be necessary to clearly establish who would be in charge of receiving the victim (preferably not a Jesuit) and establish with (the victim) the type of reparation."

Revelations of sexual abuse committed by Jesuit priests has caused outrage in Bolivia, where members of the order -- mostly Spaniards, who came to Bolivia as young men -- had become prominent in the country's civic, intellectual and political life.

"The majority of them are very well-known names," Raphael Archondo, an academic and former director of Fides, a news outlet supported by Bolivia's Jesuits, told OSV News.

The current crisis, he said, involves a younger generation of Bolivian-born Jesuits managing a crisis of their foreign-born predecessors. It also calls into question the future of Catholic education in the country.

"I believe that more than if it is a criminal investigation, it is a historical investigation and it effectively calls into question, at least in Bolivia, the church's guardianship over all organizations or institutions responsible for overseeing adolescence and childhood," Archondo said