News




A group of protestors stand outside the Shrine of Our Lady of Valverde in the southern Italian city of Enna Aug. 22, 2024, to protest the local clergy's role in covering up clerical sexual abuse. Among those present was Antonio Messina, center-right, who was 16 when Father Giuseppe Rugolo, a priest of the Diocese of Piazza Armerina, abused him. Father Rugolo was convicted March 5 on charges of aggravated sexual assault against Messina and another unnamed victim and sentenced to more than four years in prison. (OSV News/courtesy Antonio Messina)

Junno Arocho Esteves

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Enna, Italy — August 28, 2024
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Catholics in the Southern Italian city of Enna, Sicily, protested the local church's role in covering up sexual abuse after a court recently ruled that the diocesan bishop sought to protect a priest accused of having abused several minors as a seminarian.

Several local news outlets reported that a group of faithful walked out of a Mass Aug. 22 to protest the local church's involvement in covering up abuses committed by Father Giuseppe Rugolo.

In a video sent to OSV News, over 20 people walked out as Msgr. Vincenzo Murgano, vicar general of the Diocese of Piazza Armerina, presided over a Mass at the Shrine of Our Lady of Valverde in Enna.

Standing outside the shrine in silence, the protestors held signs admonishing Murgano, as well as local clergy, for their role in covering up abuse in the diocese. According to local media, a separate protest was also held in another parish.

One poster quoted Jesus' words in the Gospel of St. Matthew: "You serpents, you brood of vipers." Another large sign stated: "I do not accept sermons from those who cover up an abuse."

Among those present at the protest was Antonio Messina, who was 16 when Rugolo abused him.

Speaking over the phone with OSV News Aug. 26, Messina said two prominent priests in the diocese tried to dissuade him from denouncing Rugolo — Murgano and Msgr. Pietro Spina, parochial vicar of the St. John the Baptist Church in Enna.

When he first spoke out about his abuse, Messina and his parents first decided to speak to Spina, who was their pastor at the time. However, instead of referring the allegations to church or local authorities, Spina decided to contact Rugolo and ultimately sided with the priest.

Messina then spoke with Murgano, and requested to speak with Bishop Rosario Gisana of Piazza Armerina to inform him of the abuse. However, the vicar general, he said, "asked me to go away and forget everything that I had been through."

Rugolo was convicted March 5 on charges of aggravated sexual assault against Messina and another unnamed victim. The priest, who was a seminarian at the time of the abuse, was sentenced to more than four years in prison and barred from teaching and holding public office.

In its "Statement of Reasons" explaining the guilty verdict, the court said Rugolo "committed the sexual abuse of two young teenagers with impunity … fully aware that he could count on the support of the religious leadership, which helped to reinforce Father Rugolo's image as a prominent member of the local clergy to the outside world."

The court’s ruling, which was published July 24, stated that Gisana was "well aware for many years of the reports made concerning the abuse suffered by" Messina.

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The trial against Rugolo was notable for the public release of recordings made by the accused priest during private conversations with Gisana, in which the bishop admitted to covering up the abuse.

Gisana continues to lead the Diocese of Piazza Armerina even though his admitted actions would be subject to investigation under "Vos Estis Lux Mundi" (You are the light of the world), the pope’s 2019 document that sets out procedures that hold responsible bishops, religious superiors, and others in the case of covering up abuse.

Messina told OSV News he had sent a letter and two CDs March 25 containing chat messages by Rugolo, as well as the recordings of Gisana admitting to covering up

the priest’s abuse, to Pope Francis, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Dicastery for the Clergy and the Dicastery for Bishops.

A request sent by OSV News to the Vatican press office Aug. 27 to confirm if the Dicastery for the Doctrine of Faith is looking into Gisana is currently awaiting a response.

The Archdiocese of Agrigento, the metropolitan of the ecclesiastical province where the Diocese of Piazza Armerina was located, was also contacted by OSV News Aug. 27. As of press time, the archdiocese did not respond.

Gisana said July 26 in the Italian newspaper La Stampa that he had "not 'facilitated the predatory activity' of anyone," and that once the crime was reported — committed when he was not yet the bishop of the place — he acted.

Messina also indicated that recent coverage of his case, including a successful seven-episode podcast series titled "La Confessione" ("The Confession"), led to the organization of protests by both Catholics and non-Catholics in the city.

"We found that the most effective solution was to take part in an act that was also respectful of places of worship, respectful of the religious service as well as respectful of the faithful, as a demonstration to the church about these priests — and the bishop — who played a role in covering up the abuse committed against me by Rugolo," Messina said.

While some in the small Italian community are devoted Catholics and still defend the church’s actions, Messina said that among the faithful who saw the protest, there was a growing "awareness and a desire on the part of many people to participate in future initiatives."

Messina told OSV News that he felt he had a "duty to be" present at the silent protest and was encouraged by the presence of the people of Enna and all those who want to ensure that justice is served not only to those who abuse but also to those who enable abuse.

"For me, there is almost a sense of satisfaction," he said, "that what we are doing is correct given that, beyond the decisions made by the Italian justice system, there is a church that instead remains silent."