Opinion
NCR Voices



Detail of the cover of the March 18, 2001, issue of the National Catholic Reporter (NCR file)



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In the history of National Catholic Reporter, there are several journalists who have left an indelible mark. One is John L. Allen Jr.

For 17 years, Allen covered the Vatican and served as a senior correspondent. As NCR journalist, he appeared on CNN and delivered clear, descriptive commentary that led to a job on the news network, and then to the Boston Globe, where he created Crux at a time news organizations were seeking to innovate on the Internet. Crux later spun off as his operation that he publishes.

In 2001, in the midst of his run at NCR, Allen and managing editor Pamela Schaeffer uncovered internal church reports alleging that some Catholic clergy were exploiting their financial and spiritual authority to gain sexual favors from religious women.

With the piece, then-editor Tom Roberts penned this note:

This week's cover story is a jarring account of misused power and abuse that has remained largely hidden amid layers of cultural idiosyncrasies and church bureaucracy.

The first hints of the story began circulating several years ago. In early 1999 we began to dig for more details related to the content of two reports that came our way, one from several sources. We were also seeking an assessment of the dimensions of the problem and some indications of what was being done to address the issue.

Then other reports came to our attention. We became aware that the topic was being discussed in many gatherings of religious women.

It is deeply disturbing material.

The people who gathered the primary data for the reports on which the story is based, respected members of religious communities, professionals responsible for the church's work in the wider world, did not intend to come to the press with it. Their intent, we believe, was to awaken religious communities to the abuse and to alert the Vatican, hoping that something would be done.

We could find little evidence that anything was being done through formal church channels.

In the reporting of this story, Managing Editor Pam Schaeffer and Rome Correspondent John L. Allen Jr. found that those who compiled the reports were reluctant to provide further details.

Read the rest of the note here:
https://natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2001a/031601/031601b.htm.

Below is the first one-third of the story.

Advertisement

Reports of abuse

AIDS exacerbates sexual exploitation of nuns, reports allege

By John L. Allen Jr. and Pamela Schaeffer

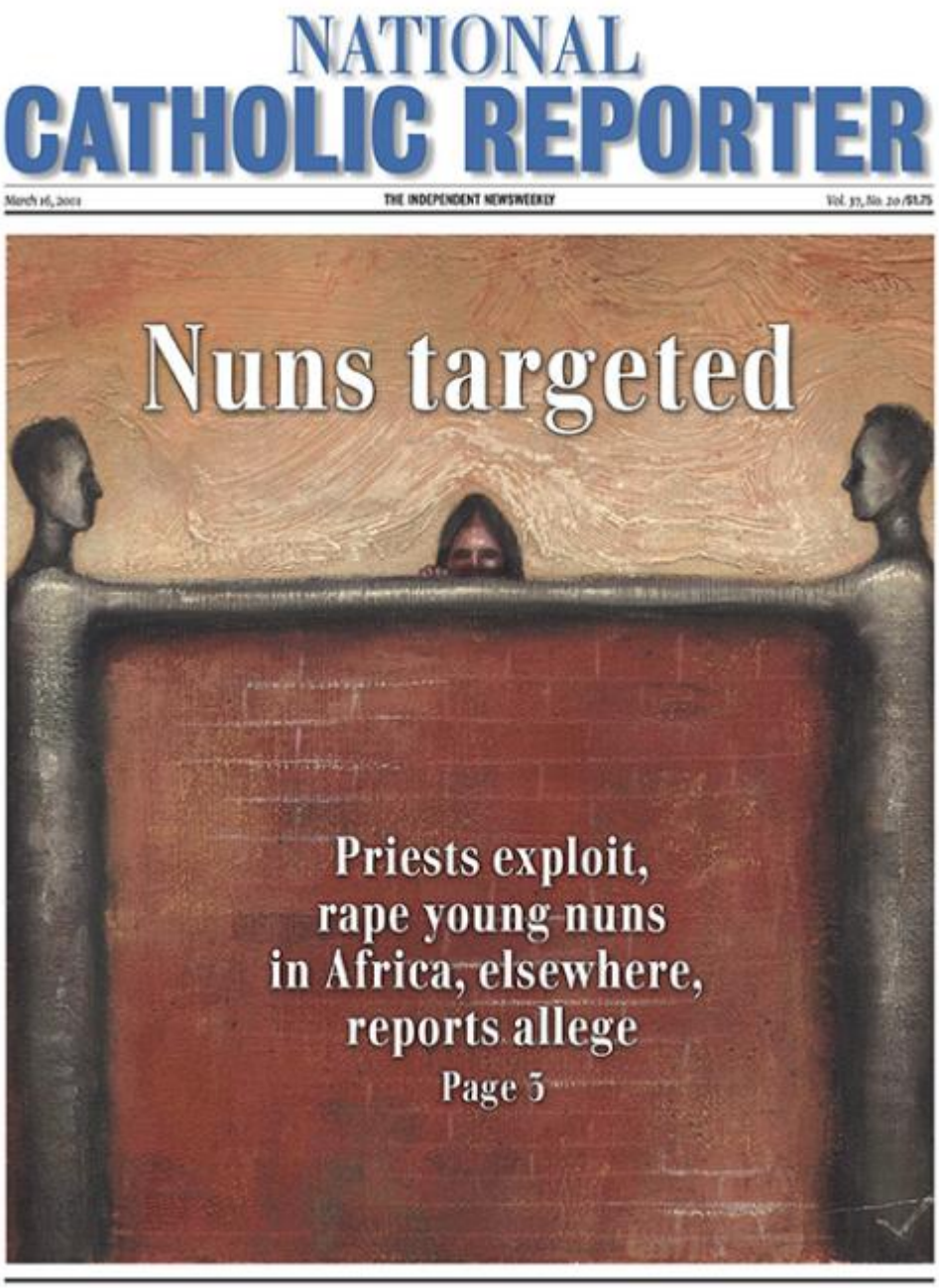
NCR Staff

March 16, 2001

ROME AND KANSAS CITY, MO. — Several reports written by senior members of women's religious orders and by an American priest assert that sexual abuse of nuns by priests, including rape, is a serious problem, especially in Africa and other parts of the developing world.

The reports allege that some Catholic clergy exploit their financial and spiritual authority to gain sexual favors from religious women, many of whom, in developing countries, are culturally conditioned to be subservient to men. The reports obtained by NCR — some recent, some in circulation at least seven years — say priests at times demand sex in exchange for favors, such as permission or certification to work in a given diocese. The reports, five in all, indicate that in Africa particularly, a continent ravaged by HIV and AIDS, young nuns are sometimes seen as safe targets of sexual activity. In a few extreme instances, according to the documentation, priests have impregnated nuns and then encouraged them to have abortions.

In some cases, according to one of the reports, nuns, through naiveté or social conditioning to obey authority figures, may readily comply with sexual demands.



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Although the problem has not been aired in public, the reports have been discussed in councils of religious women and men and in the Vatican.

In November 1998, a four-page paper titled "The Problem of the Sexual Abuse of African Religious in Africa and Rome" was presented by Missionaries of Our Lady of Africa Sr. Marie McDonald, the report's author, to the Council of 16, a group that meets three times a year. The council is made up of delegates from three bodies:

the Union of Superiors General, an association of men's religious communities based in Rome, the International Union of Superiors General, a comparable group for women, and the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, the Vatican office that oversees religious life.

Last September, Benedictine Sr. Esther Fangman, a psychological counselor and president of the Federation of St. Scholastica, raised the issue in an address at a Rome congress of 250 Benedictine abbots. The federation is an organization of 22 monasteries in the United States and two in Mexico.

Five years earlier, on Feb. 18, 1995, Cardinal Eduardo Martínez, prefect of the Vatican congregation for religious life, along with members of his staff, were briefed on the problem by Medical Missionary of Mary Sr. Maura O'Donohue, a physician.

O'Donohue is responsible for a 1994 report that constitutes one of the more comprehensive accounts. At the time of its writing, she had spent six years as AIDS coordinator for the Catholic Fund for Overseas Development based in London.

Though statistics related to sexual abuse of religious women are unavailable, most religious leaders interviewed by NCR say the frequency and consistency of the reports of sexual abuse point to a problem that needs to be addressed.

"I don't believe these are simply exceptional cases," Benedictine Fr. Notker Wolf, abbot primate of the Benedictine order, told NCR. "I think the abuse described is happening. How much it happens, what the numbers are, I have no way of knowing. But it is a serious matter, and we need to discuss it."

Wolf has made several trips to Africa to visit Benedictine institutions and is in contact with members of the order there.

NCR at 60 years

Read more about NCR's first 60 years in the recently published *National Catholic Reporter: Beacon of Justice, Community and Hope*. Click here to learn more about the book.

In her reports, O'Donohue links the sexual abuse to the prevalence of AIDS in Africa and concerns about contracting the disease.

"Sadly, the sisters also report that priests have sexually exploited them because they too had come to fear contamination with HIV by sexual contact with prostitutes and other 'at risk' women," she wrote in 1994.

O'Donohue declined requests for interviews with NCR.

In some cultures, O'Donohue wrote, men who traditionally would have sought out prostitutes instead are turning to "secondary school girls, who, because of their younger age, were considered 'safe' from HIV."

Similarly, religious sisters "constitute another group which has been identified as 'safe' targets for sexual activity," O'Donohue wrote.

"For example," O'Donohue wrote, "a superior of a community of sisters in one country was approached by priests requesting that sisters would be made available to them for sexual favors. When the superior refused, the priests explained that they would otherwise be obliged to go to the village to find women, and might thus get AIDS."

O'Donohue wrote that at first she reacted with "shock and disbelief" at the "magnitude" of the problem she was encountering through her contacts with "a great number of sisters during the course of my visits" in a number of countries.

Read the full story from 2001 here: https://natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2001a/031601/031601a.htm.

Related: NCR first exposed Catholic Church's sex abuse scandal 40 years ago this month

This story appears in the **NCR at 60 years** feature series. View the full series.