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French-based Catholic movement says founder was sex abuser

by John Thavis by Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY -- A Catholic movement based in France has acknowledged with "humility and repentance" that acts of sexual abuse were committed by its founder and other important members of the organization.

The Community of the Beatitudes, in a statement posted on its French website Nov. 16, said that under the oversight of a commissioner appointed last year by the Vatican, it was undergoing a process of "purification, restructuring and re-founding."

The detailed statement came two weeks ahead of the scheduled start of a criminal trial of Brother Pierre-Etienne Albert, a top member of the community, who has been accused of dozens of acts of sexual abuse of minors over a period of 15 years.

The statement said it wanted to emphasize that the community's own process of self-examination had been going on for several years.

"The new information about the gravely culpable acts committed by several of its members, in particular its founder, has led the community to move further ahead in the process of repentance and purification of its memory," the statement said.

The Community of the Beatitudes was founded in France in 1973 by two Protestant couples who desired to live as the first Christians did. The primary founder, Gerard Croissant, was a Protestant minister who became a Catholic and was ordained a permanent deacon in 1978. In 2002, the organization was given official recognition by the Vatican.

The statement said the founder, Croissant, had committed "crimes against the moral law of the church" and had acknowledged "serious failures" in sexual matters, particularly in regard to sisters in the community, many of whom left because of the abuse. One case of abuse by Croissant involved an underage girl, it said.

"His prestige as a charismatic founder, together with the seduction of his words, led most of his victims to be taken in by supposedly mystical arguments, which covered grave violations of morality with spiritual themes," it said.

The statement said all this was "for too long kept secret inside a small circle" in the community. In 2008, it said, diocesan and Vatican officials intervened and removed Croissant from diaconal ministry and forced him to leave the community.

Although Croissant has been told to live in silence and penitence, he has continued to give talks and hold meetings without the church's permission, the statement said.

"The community is deeply ashamed by the behavior of (Croissant) and expresses its closeness to the suffering of those who were abused by him," the statement said. It said the community would do everything to ensure that such abuses do not occur again.

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The statement said abuse also was committed against members by Croissant's brother, who served for a time as the head of the community but was expelled when the accusations came to light in 2010.

The community said the first signs of "fragility and error" began to appear in the movement in 2002. In addition to acts of abuse, it cited "unbalanced psycho-spiritual practices," a confusion between consecrated and lay status of members, and problems of governance.

Many members began to leave, and in 2007 the Vatican first outlined a restructuring program for the movement, reconstituting it as a community of diocesan right, under the canonical authority of the archbishop of Toulouse, France. In 2010, in the face of continual internal divisions, the Vatican named Dominican Father Henry Donneaud to take charge of the organization and complete the process of internal reconciliation.

The statement posted online, which was signed by Father Donneaud and the community's general council, said that despite the mistakes of the past, it was false and defamatory to call the Community of the Beatitudes a "sect." It said the community has placed its fate in the hands of the church, which in turn has recognized the community's "authentic fruits of vitality, solidarity and evangelical witness."

The community is active in more than 60 dioceses around the world, including the Archdiocese of Denver.

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