

#NunsToo

Sexual abuse of nuns – facts and questions

by Doris Reisinger

(original German text: #NunsToo. Sexueller Missbrauch an Ordensfrauen. Fakten und Fragen, Stimmen der Zeit 143 (2018), 374-384. Available online <https://www.herder.de/stz/hefte/archiv/143-2018/6-2018/nunstoo-sexueller-missbrauch-an-ordensfrauen-fakten-und-fragen/>)

When women actors came forward with sexual abuse allegations against the producer Harvey Weinstein in autumn 2017, the consequent reactions from Hollywood revealed what appears to be a *reaction to abuse pattern*: Even though everybody in Hollywood seemed to know of the offences, at the same time everybody appeared to be surprised by them, when they were made public. That means, that practically everyone who had known had been acquiescing instead of asking questions and taking a stand. While those who could have known had they only wanted to, tacitly assumed that whatever it was, surely it was not that severe and while others again were trivialising or making jokes: Nothing but silly rumours. People make up all kinds of stories, don't they?

Catholics might be familiar with this mixture of rumours, jokes and repression when it comes to a group of victims that has hardly ever managed to be even seen as such: Nuns. We certainly know jokes about "sexual experiences" of nuns, and when it comes to reality we tend to assume that surely those experiences are limited to very few consensual acts, to which even nuns may occasionally be seduced. A truly entertaining idea, isn't it? Even nuns are human beings. Who, on the contrary, is less amused by the idea of sexually active nuns, might simply assume that, despite rumours, there is nothing at all. But, in which way ever people are dealing with it: It is depressing, because we are actually far beyond mere rumours. The facts about the sexual abuse suffered by Catholic nuns are distressing. Apparently Church officials have so far reacted to them by falling into a deep silence. – Now, this text might not have the power to break this silence, but it certainly can gather and bring to light again all those facts that have long been openly accessible to everybody who wanted to know them.

The Nuns of Sant' Ambrogio – story of a system of abuse

Some years ago the Church Historian Hubert Wolf created the bestseller „The Nuns of Sant' Ambrogio“¹. The historical documents he has analyzed shed light on a story that seems to be a Dan Brown phantasy. Sadly, the public also treats it like one, while actually this story must not and cannot be despised as mere fiction, for after all, Wolf is quoting one to one historical documents. He presents the events in a Roman women's convent in the 19th century as the story of a false saint, by whom even some high ranking clerics were taken in – among them a very prominent proponent of Papal Infallibility. While at the same time this is a story of a particularly effective system of sexual abuse. Across numerous pages Wolf is quoting statements of victims who describe in painstaking detail, how the „Mother Abbess“ used her position of power and her reputation of sanctity not only to abuse the nuns sexually, but also to tout the abusive acts as acts of divine favour, without there being anyone who would have dared to refuse being granted this „favour“ let alone to try and stop her. What Wolf has brought to light here is a prime example of an abuse system: One person who has literally absolute power over others uses this power to sexually abuse those dependent on her while letting the very few who possibly could stop her assist with the abuse.

It is therefore all the more surprising that the abused women are hardly seen as victims in the reception of the book. Although Wolf himself uses the term “sexual abuse”, some feel pressed to make an objection that the critic of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* phrases as follows: „Whether the expressions ‘sexual abuse’ and ‘lesbian sexuality’ do justice to the feeling and thinking of nuns who grew up in the first half of the 19th century in the simplest rural conditions remains to be seen.“² Now, it is very well possible, that those victims did not see themselves as victims. After all, they were convinced to be granted divine favours – just as a young actress may see her encounter with an influential producer as a special favour. Moreover, novices in the 19th century were probably not aware of their right to personal and sexual self-determination, nor of the terms necessary for naming the injustice they had experienced. Surely there were hardly any terms such as “sexual abuse” or “abusive behaviour” in the 19th century. As a matter of fact such terms are of central importance, especially for victims, not only to express what they have experienced, but first and foremost to understand it themselves. As a result of lacking that kind of concepts the nuns of Sant’ Ambrogio had hardly a chance to understand what injustice was done to them. But to conclude from this lack of awareness on the part of the victims that what these women have experienced would not have been an abuse would mean to declare abuse harmless as long as the abused are not aware of the injustice done to them. It would be playing into the hands of the perpetrators, whose strategy is precisely to persuade their victims that the abuse is not an abuse at all, but something quite normal, if not even some kind of divine favour. Too much understanding of a different time or culture, in which abuse appears supposedly normal, is prohibited at the latest when it is an abuse closer to our time and culture than we could wish for.

There may be Catholics who tend to despise the abuse suffered by the nuns of Sant’ Ambrogio as something that happened a long time ago: Surely, that kind of abuse may have existed in the past and that may still frighten us today, its existence must of course be acknowledged somehow and in one way or the other it may have to be worked through, but otherwise it no longer puts pressure on us to act, because the perpetrators and victims of that time are no longer among us... Whoever tends to think this way is mistaken. It has principally become impossible to assume that such assaults are a thing of the past, as anyone who wants to see it knows that there are still perpetrators and victims of sexual abuse in our convents and religious institutes today.

Maura O’Donohue’s reports to Rome

Anyone who has lived on the African continent for a while, or who has studied or taught theology in Rome over the past twenty years, is probably familiar with insinuating jokes about African monasteries, priests and nuns, about their abundance of children and their contraceptive problems. The fact that these jokes are pushed aside with a wink doesn't make it any better, on the contrary: In view of the long known facts, it seems completely incomprehensible that no one in the Church seems seriously interested in the suffering of the women concerned, who have put themselves at the service of the Church. And it is simply incomprehensible and outrageous that this problem is still perceived as purely African and not to be taken too seriously.

It is not the case that the competent church leaders, especially the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life in Rome, are not aware of the cases. It just doesn't seem like anything is being done about it. This becomes particularly clear when one considers the discrepancy that exists between the extent of the incidents that have become known and the official ecclesial response to these cases. Besides Marie McDonald from the *Missionaries of Our Lady of Africa* and the Benedictine Esther Fangman, it was above all Maura O'Donohue from the *Medical Missionaries of Mary* who reported the problem in the 1990s.³ The American religious and development worker lived for years in various

African countries and during this time was repeatedly confronted with cases in which religious women were abused by priests. The sheer number and severity of the cases finally prompted her to send comprehensive documentation to Rome. In 1995, her report, together with those of others, was sent to the then Chairman of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life, Eduardo Martínez Somalo.

These reports speak of widespread abuses of religious women by priests.⁴ Priests feared that prostitutes and other sexually active women might be infected with AIDS and would therefore regard sisters as “safe” sexual partners. It is said to have happened that „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”.⁵ Priests would force sexual contact, for instance in exchange for letters of recommendation on which the sisters would depend.⁶ In one case, 29 nuns of the same community in Malawi would have become pregnant by diocesan priests. When the Superior complained to the Bishop, she was removed.

In many cases in which sisters would have become pregnant, priests would have received mild admonitions, while the pregnant women had to leave their communities, which often brought them into extreme distress. A disgrace to their families, abandoned by their communities, some - then single mothers - were forced to enter into marriage as second or third women or to prostitute themselves to ensure their own survival and that of their child, exposing themselves to the additional risk of infection with AIDS.⁷ The most shocking cases are those in which forced abortions have occurred or nuns died. O’Donohue reports about a case in which a priest had taken a young religious woman who had become pregnant by him to a hospital for abortion. The woman died during the procedure. The very same priest who had abused her and forced her to abortion subsequently held Requiem Mass for her.⁸

What was the official reaction to these reports? At first both remained secret - the reports as well as possible reactions of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life. Only when the reports became public in 2001 and were taken up by the *National Catholic Reporter* and the *New York Times*, among others, the then Vatican press spokesman, Joaquín Navarro-Valls, made a statement that can be summarized as follows: He acknowledged that these cases were known in Rome. However, the problem would be limited to a small geographical area. Work would be done to improve training and solve individual cases. Nor should the heroic faith of the great majority of religious be forgotten.⁹ It appears that much more has not happened since then than the publication of this statement.

Although the current rumours and jokes about African monasteries show that this communication strategy, namely the talk of a “small geographical space“, seems to have worked, there is not much to suggest that Navarro-Valls might have been right in claiming the local confinement of the phenomenon. Firstly, his statement does not provide any evidence to support this claim, and secondly, the reports mention incidents in twenty-three countries, including Italy, Ireland, the Philippines, India, Brazil and the United States.¹⁰

An US survey reveals shocking findings

Navarro-Valls could have known of a study carried out a few years earlier in the United States. The starting point of the study was everyday clinical life: American psychologists who were familiar with the traumas of sexually abused nuns decided in the mid-1990s to address the subject systematically. Because the literature on such cases was extremely meagre - not to say non-existent - they themselves initiated an investigation on the subject.¹¹ They interviewed 578 religious from three different

institutes in the USA. As a result, sexual abuse proved frighteningly normal. Of the women surveyed, 39.9 percent said they had experienced sexual abuse. 29.3 percent said they had been sexually abused while in the community. In 39 percent of all reported cases, genital sexual contact was observed.¹²

The most common form of abuse was sexual exploitation / sexual coercion. It is defined by the fact that an imbalance of power in a professional relationship is exploited by the professional, who would actually be obliged to professional distance, to approach the person entrusted to him sexually. Due to the existing power imbalance and the role of the professional part, there can be no consensual sexual contacts in such relationships: „Sexual exploitation is best defined in the context of a violation of professional ethics. It occurs when a person in power takes advantage of the dependence and vulnerability of a “client“. [...] It is always the responsibility of the person in power to avoid sexual behavior in these relationships because: (a) it is a violation of role expectations; (b) it is a misuse of authority and power; (c) it takes advantage of vulnerability and dependence; and (d) meaningful consent is impossible, since consent to sexual activity can only occur in an atmosphere of mutuality and equality“¹³ This implies that: „Exploitation occurs whether or not the client believes that she or he is voluntarily entering a sexual relationship with the professional.“¹⁴ Two circumstances led the victims to believe in many cases that they had actually agreed to the actions: That the priest broke his own promise of celibacy created for the sisters an illusion of eye level between them and the respective perpetrator. On the other hand, in many cases the perpetrators built up the impression of a special, God-pleasing love relationship. Many victims realize only late that they were exploited and abused, for example when the supposedly loving person put aside their friendly face, did not accept a “no” from the victim or indifferently or violently overcame the victim’s needs and fears and the power imbalance became fully felt again as a result. A key experience for many seemed to be the realization that the same perpetrator also had sexual relations with other sisters.

As mentioned before, there were also female perpetrators: About 13 percent of those questioned said they had experienced sexual exploitation or harassment by a fellow sister.¹⁵ In the vast majority of cases, however, the perpetrators were male and clerics. Mostly they were the confessors and spiritual leaders of their victims. As consequences of the experiences of abuse, the victims name feelings of guilt and shame, a disturbed relationship with God, depression and even suicidal thoughts.

Past and Current Sequelae of Sexual Exploitation¹⁶

Sexual exploitation sequelae	In the past	Currently	Wilcoxon Z
Anger	56.0	44.7	-1.9
Shame or embarrassment	78.0	44.0	-5.2***
Anxiety	75.2	19.9	-7.8***
Confusion	77.3	19.1	-7.8***
Depression	42.6	15.6	-4.7***
Difficulty imagining God as Father	19.1	14.9	-1.2
Difficulty praying	45.4	14.2	-5.5***
Self-blame for the exploitation	36.2	9.2	-4.8***
Relationship with God disrupted	36.9	9.2	-5.2***
Considered leaving religious life	28.4	7.1	-4.4***
Difficulty sleeping	38.3	7.1	-5.8***
Considered leaving the Church	7.8	5.0	-1.5
Difficulty working or concentrating	48.9	5.0	-6.8***
Felt that God was punishing you	7.8	2.1	-2.2*
Suicidal thoughts	9.9	2.1	-2.9**
Felt as if you wanted to die	9.9	1.4	-2.8**
Attempted suicide	3.5	0.0	-2.0*

Note: Values are percentages based on N = 141 (missing = 5)

*p<0.05. **p<0.01. ***p<0.001.

Two American journals reported on the study: A summary of the results was published in the *Review for Religious* in the summer of 1998 and in the *Review of Religious Research* in December of the same year. What were the consequences? What has happened since then? A newspaper report quotes one of the researchers who says he had to agree not to issue a press release about the study because the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) was concerned that the data could be sensationalistically exploited. The head of research had the impression that they preferred not to wash their dirty laundry in public.¹⁷ Official reactions to the study do not seem to have been given by the LCWR or individual institutes in the past twenty years.

Recent cases

Sadly, there have also been cases in the recent past. The Korea Times recently reported a case from 2011 that became known to the public in February 2018. The Korean nun Kim Min-kyung was molested during a mission in Sudan by Han Man-sam, a Korean diocesan priest. While they were in Sudan, „she had to stay up all night fearing that Han would break into her room and rape her. She said Han pounded on her door for hours into the dawn. On one day, he broke the lock and came into her room saying, ‘I cannot control my body, so you should help me.’ Kim said she barely managed to escape from the room.“ Although the nun turned to two other priests who were there for help, they did nothing. Meanwhile, however, Han has been suspended.¹⁸

But there are also prominent recent cases from Europe, such as that of the founder of *Saint Jean*, Marie-Dominique Philippe. He developed a spirituality of spiritual love (*l'amour d'amitié*), which he (and probably also other fathers of the same community)¹⁹ used to approach young sisters and other young women sexually.²⁰ Another well-known case is that of Gérard Croissant (Brother Ephraim), founder of the Community of the Beatitudes, who for years forced young religious women into sexual intercourse in so-called “mystical associations”. A witness to these incidents remembers as follows: „One day he began to explain to me that he was practising what he called ‘mystical union’, a union of prayer as well as sexual union, which he said was practised in the Church by St. Clare with St. Francis of Assisi or Pope John Paul II with Sister Faustina Kowalska. He claimed that only true mystics could understand. I will put it another way: he seduced the nuns and slept with them, persuading them that it was Heaven's will. I was devastated to learn that, it took me days to realize. I decided to tell the shepherd (*berger*) at the time but he didn't believe me. So, in front of him, I called Ephraim on the phone. I put him on speaker and talked to Ephraim about a young nun who was very psychologically fragile and with whom he was sleeping. I asked him what would happen if the nun got pregnant. Believing himself alone with me, Ephraim answered me this: “She will flee to the United States to give birth and then we will act as if she had adopted a child.” I was very worried about that sister. The very night she took her vows, Ephraim slept with her, telling her they were wrapped in the Holy Spirit.“²¹

In addition to these cases that have become publicly known, there is a number of cases that are (so far) difficult to calculate. The latter is something the members of AVREF can talk about. The association based in Paris, which cares for victims of spiritual abuse in Catholic communities, has received victim reports which suggest that these are not isolated cases. The pattern is always the same: often very young religious women are abused by priests who take advantage of their role as founders, confessors or spiritual leaders to force women into sexual acts - sometimes spiritually exalted and supposedly consensual, sometimes violently enforced. AVREF is mainly concerned with cases that are unlikely to

ever be reported on in any newspaper. Most victims are so hurt, confused and often traumatised by their experiences that they are simply unable to go public if they manage to confide in someone at all. This often happens only tentatively and only many years after the abuse experiences.

Two pressing questions

The summary of the findings collected here can only consist of two very clearly and urgently formulated questions: How is it that religious women could (and probably still) become victims of sexual abuse in such a frighteningly high number? And: How is it that no one in the Church seems to seriously ask this question?

The fact that church institutions are obviously aware of the seriousness of internal incidents, but on the other hand take hardly any other measures than to keep them as far away from the public as possible, is a phenomenon with which we have already made our sad acquaintance in cases of child abuse. However, in dealing with child abuse, the church has for the first time been forced to deal publicly with the offences and its own institutional responsibility despite this internal tendency. Why should such an argument not also be possible in this case, where we have reason to believe that there has been sexual abuse of religious women in at least twenty-three African, Asian, European and American countries, that this abuse has resulted in deaths, forced abortions, serious mental illnesses and decades of suffering among those affected, that it may affect around thirty percent of all religious women and continues to take place?

The real question, however, is not about the causes of silence, but about the causes of abuse (although the two are probably closely related): How is it possible that religious women could become victims of sexual abuse in such an alarmingly high number? What part do power relations between Superiors and Sisters, between Priests and Sisters play? What part does a perhaps specific dynamic of spiritual accompaniment between celibate people play? How openly can such cases be discussed in the respective institutes of consecrated life? Do victims in their communities find an atmosphere in which they can talk, an atmosphere in which, in case of doubt, the reputation of their institute is not above the well-being of the individual member? How should perpetrators be dealt with - especially when they are perhaps respected clerics and renowned spiritual leaders?

Last but not least, the question of the position of religious women in the ecclesiastical power structure must be asked. Is it possible that the ignorance of the cases of abuse is not only a reaction to the abuse, but also a cause for this abuse? In this year's March edition of the *Osservatore Romano*, there are a number of nuns whose statements would at least support such a thesis.²² The nuns report about their experiences of exploitation. Many sisters would work as housekeepers or pastoral workers without a contract of employment and without reasonable pay. Sisters would be made available to priests and bishops to clean for them, to wash their clothes, to serve them food - but sometimes they would not even be invited to eat with the respective dignitary at the same table. One sister is quoted as saying: "The sisters are considered volunteers who can be disposed of at will. This leads to real abuse of power."²³ The fact that the women quoted in this article have chosen to remain anonymous is evidence of a climate of fear in the Church. This climate ought to be overcome by those responsible by reaching out to these women. However, it is a remarkable and hopeful step that they have spoken at all.

In general, there is reason to be confident that we are at a historical moment which is favourable for us to finally discuss this subject. We are witnessing an ongoing debate in which women around the world

speak and are heard on the issue of sexual abuse. Not forgetting that this particular debate about the sexual exploitation of nuns began already decades ago, when Maura O'Donohue, Marie McDonald and Esther Fangman drew attention to the sexual abuse of religious women for the first time. And even though the known cases were long hushed up, it is not like nothing would have happened since then: Slowly and effectively, certain people in the church have become aware that such cases exist and that it is necessary to talk about them. When I gave a lecture on spiritual abuse last autumn, which was attended by spiritual directors and leaders of retreat houses from various German dioceses, I was surprised at how clearly some of those present spontaneously spoke out on this topic - which was not directly related to the topic of the lecture. They insisted sexual abuse would be a big issue for religious women. In spiritual accompaniment and in retreat this would come up again and again.

Once victims have found a voice to talk about their suffering in a protected setting, they have already taken the first step towards coming to terms with it. The ecclesial community and religious communities should now respond to them. We now know not only that victims of sexual abuse continue to suffer from the acts and need help even after decades - and not only help in the form of therapies: Victims need at least just as vital the official recognition of the injustice they have suffered. They also have the right that perpetrators and institutions, which in many cases have become complicit, be prosecuted and held accountable. We also know, however, that the predominant concern about institutional standing, the associated silence and the insistence on "internal solutions" do not lead to abuse being effectively combated.

It seems to me that there is only an appropriate reaction from the church to the alarming findings compiled in this article: To investigate the conditions of abuse, to confront and bring to justice the perpetrators and to take effective measures to prevent future cases. First and foremost, however, the victims must be relieved of their fear of speaking and given an ear. It is the task of church leaders, religious congregations, religious superiors, and episcopal vicars for consecrated life to officially proclaim to the victims what "Sister Cécile" dares to say in the *Osservatore* only under a pseudonym: "You have the right to speak"!

¹ Hubert Wolf, *The Nuns of Sant' Ambrogio. The True Story of a Convent in Scandal*, 2015.

² Urs Hafner, *Sexualleben als Gottesdienst*. *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 27. März 2013.

³ John Allen and Pamela Schaeffer, *Reports of abuse. AIDS exacerbates sexual exploitation of nuns, reports allege*. *National Catholic Reporter*, 16. März 2001. <www.ncronline.org>.

⁴ Chris Hedges, *Documents Allege Abuse of Nuns by Priests*. *The New York Times*. 21st March 2001. <www.nytimes.com>.

⁵ Allen and Schaeffer.

⁶ Allen and Schaeffer.

⁷ Allen and Schaeffer.

⁸ Hedges.

⁹ Hedges.

¹⁰ The twenty-three countries listed in the report are: Botswana, Burundi, Brazil, Colombia, Ghana, India, Ireland, Italy, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, South

Africa, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Tonga, Uganda, United States, Zambia, Zaire, Zimbabwe. Allen and Schaeffer.

¹¹ A summary can be found in: John T. Chibnall, Ann Wolf, und Paul N. Duckro. A National Survey of the Sexual Trauma Experiences of Catholic Nuns. *Review of Religious Research*, 1998, 142-167. And also in: Paul N. Duckro, John T. Chibnall, und M. Ann Wolf. *Women Religious and Sexual Trauma. Review for Religious*, 1998, 304-313.

¹² Chibnall et al, 151.

¹³ Chibnall et al, 144.

¹⁴ Duckro et al, 307.

¹⁵ Duckro et al, 312.

¹⁶ Table from: Chibnall 1998, 152.

¹⁷ Bill Smith, Nuns as sexual victims get little notice. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 4th January 2003.

¹⁸ Lee Kyung-min, #MeToo spreads to Catholic Church. *The Korea Times*. 26th February 2018. <www.koreatimes.co.kr>.

¹⁹ AVREF have such reports of victims.

²⁰ Céline Hoyeau, Sur le P. Marie-Dominique Philippe, il faut regarder le réel en face. *La Croix*. 14th May 2013. <www.la-croix.com>.

²¹ Emmanuel Lalande and Sophie Bonnet, Les Béatitudes. Dans l'enfer d'une communauté religieuse. *Les Inrockuptibles*, 29th November 2011, <www.lesinrocks.com>.

²² Marie-Lucile Kubacki, Il lavoro (quasi) gratuito delle suore. *L'Osservatore Romano*, 1st March 2018. <www.osservatoreromano.va>.

²³ Marie-Lucile Kubacki, Il lavoro (quasi) gratuito delle suore. *L'Osservatore Romano*, 1st March 2018. <www.osservatoreromano.va>.