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The report highlights nuns' 'disturbing testimonies'

By the BBC's religious affairs correspondent Jane Little

A day after the emergence of a report on the rape of nuns by priests, the Roman Catholic Aid Agency, Cafod, has confirmed that it showed the Vatican the report seven years ago.

The leaked report said that priests and missionaries across several continents were forcing nuns to have sex with them.

On Tuesday, the Vatican confirmed that such abuse had been taking place, but denied that it was so widespread.

Among the abuses detailed is the case of a nun being forced to have an abortion by the priest who impregnated her. She later died and he officiated at her requiem mass.

Also cited is the case of a mother superior who repeatedly complained to her local bishop that priests in the diocese had made 29 of her nuns pregnant

The bishop, according to the report, subsequently relieved her of her duties.

'Disturbing testimonies'

In particular, the report singles out Africa where priests and missionaries, wary of catching HIV, have targetted nuns in a bid for safe sex.



The vatican says it will investigate internally

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The report, which was leaked to respected American Journal, the National Catholic Reporter, was written seven years ago by a nun and physician, Maura O'Donohue, who was then Aids coordinator for the Catholic Relief Charity, Cafod.

The charity says it helped Sister O'Donohue take what it described as the "disturbing testimonies" from nuns across the world to the relevant authorities, including the Vatican.

But it says neither Cafod nor the author, who still works for the charity in London, leaked it and it was never intended to be made public.

As such, it reinforces other reports of sexual abuse and the rape of nuns on the continent by their male colleagues.

In 1998, Marie MacDonald, head of the Missionaries of Our Lady of Africa, presented a similar study on "sexual abuse and rape committed by priests" to the Vatican.

Her order has declined to comment on it.

Vatican denial

Sister O'Donohue's report covers a much wider area.

According to the National Catholic Reporter, she cites cases in 23 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe and North and South America.

The Vatican response has so far has been one of denial that the problem is so widespread, and promises to investigate the issue internally.

Instead the Vatican was keen to emphasise the "often heroic faith" expressed by the large majority of clergy and those in religious orders.

This sentiment was echoed by the Missionary News Agency, Misna, which while condemning the abuse, recalled that missionaries often work "in situations of extreme psychological and physical hardship."

That, however, will be cold comfort to those who have complained of a conspiracy of silence over the issue for several years.

They argue that the church hierarchy should have taken direct responsibility for the abuse, and stopped it.

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