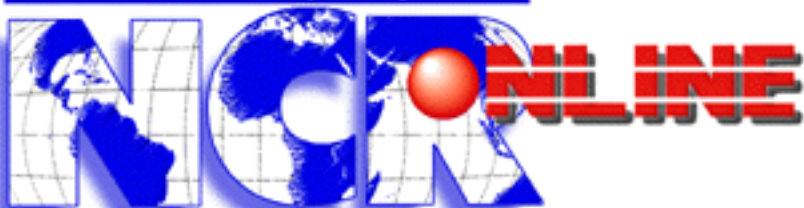


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-- By Ralph Cipriano

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National Catholic Reporter



This week's
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Cover story

Reports of abuse

AIDS exacerbates sexual exploitation of nuns, reports allege

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR. and PAMELA SCHAEFFER
NCR Staff, 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.

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. Nokter 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.

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.

Different view of celibacy

“The AIDS pandemic has drawn attention to issues which may not previously have been considered significant,” she wrote. “The enormous challenges which AIDS poses for members of religious orders and the clergy is only now becoming evident.”

In a report on her 1995 meeting with Cardinal Martínez in the Vatican, O’Donohue noted that celibacy may have different meanings in different cultures. For instance, she wrote in her report, a vicar general in one African diocese had talked “quite openly” about the view of celibacy in Africa, saying that “celibacy in the African context means a priest does not get married but does not mean he does not have children.”

Of the world’s 1 billion Catholics, 116.6 million -- about 12 percent -- live in Africa. According to the 2001 Catholic Almanac, 561 are bishops and archbishops, 26,026 are priests and 51,304 are nuns.

In addition to such general overviews, Martínez’s office has also received documentation on specific cases. In one such incident, dating from 1988 in Malawi and cited in O’Donohue’s 1994 report, the leadership team of a diocesan women’s congregation was dismissed by the local bishop after it complained that 29 sisters had been impregnated by diocesan priests. Western missionaries helped the leadership team compile a dossier that was eventually submitted to Rome.

One of those missionaries, a veteran of more than two decades in Africa, said the Malawi case was complex and the issue of sexual liaisons was not the only factor involved. She described the incident in a not-for-attribution interview with *NCR*.

The missionary said the leadership team had adopted rules preventing sisters from spending the night in a rectory, banning priests from staying overnight in convents and prohibiting sisters from being alone with priests. The rules were intended to reduce the possibility of sexual contact.

Several sources told *NCR* that religious communities as well as church

officials have taken steps to correct the problem, though they were reluctant to cite specific examples.

Others say the climate of secrecy that still surrounds the issue indicates more needs to be done.

The secrecy is due in part to efforts by religious orders to work within the system to address the problems and in part to the cultural context in which they occur. In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, where the problems are reportedly the most severe, sexual behavior and AIDS are rarely discussed openly. Among many people in that region of Central and Southern Africa, sexual topics are virtually taboo, according to many who have worked there.

Expressing frustration at unsuccessful efforts to get church officials to address the problem, O'Donohue wrote in 1994, "Groups of sisters from local congregations have made passionate appeals for help to members of international congregations and explain that, when they themselves try to make representations to church authorities about harassment by priests, they simply 'are not heard.' "

The Vatican press office did not respond to *NCR* requests for comment on this story.

O'Donohue wrote that, although she was aware of incidents in some 23 countries, including the United States, on five continents, the majority happened in Africa.

Ironically, given the reticence of many Africans to talk about sex, casual sex is common in parts of Africa, and sexual abstinence is rare. It's a culture in which AIDS thrives. Experts say the view derives from a deeply rooted cultural association between maleness and progeny -- a view that makes the church's insistence on celibacy difficult not only in practice but also in concept for some African priests.

AIDS rampant in Africa

Some 25.3 million of the world's 36.1 million HIV-positive persons live in sub-Saharan Africa. Since the epidemic began in the late 1970s, 17 million Africans have died of AIDS, according to the World Health Organization. Of the 5.3 million new cases of HIV infection in 2000, 3.8 million occurred in Africa.

According to a graphic article on AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa in the Feb. 12 issue of *Time* magazine, "Casual sex of every kind is commonplace. Everywhere there's premarital sex, sex as recreation. Obligatory sex and its abusive counterpart, coercive sex. Transactional sex: sex as a gift, sugar-daddy sex. Extramarital sex, second families, multiple partners."

Further, *Time* reported, women, taught from birth to obey men, feel

powerless to protect themselves from men's sexual desires.

Even accounting for promiscuity -- which in fact, some experts have argued, is no less a problem in Western nations -- the religious men and women raising the issue of sexual exploitation of religious women say the situations they report on are clearly intolerable and, in some cases, approach the unspeakable.

In one instance, according to O'Donohue, a priest took a nun for an abortion, and she died during the procedure. He later officiated at her requiem Mass.

Harassment common

In McDonald's report, she states that "sexual harassment and even rape of sisters by priests and bishops is allegedly common," and that "sometimes when a sister becomes pregnant, the priest insists that she have an abortion." She said her report referred mainly to Africa and to African sisters, priests and bishops -- not because the problem is exclusively an African one, but because the group preparing the report drew "mainly on their own experience in Africa and the knowledge they have obtained from the members of their own congregations or from other congregations -- especially diocesan congregations in Africa."

"We know that the problem exists elsewhere too," she wrote.

"It is precisely because of our love for the church and for Africa that we feel so distressed about the problem," McDonald wrote.

McDonald's was the report presented in 1998 to the Council of 16. She declined to be interviewed by *NCR*.

When a sister becomes pregnant, McDonald wrote, she is usually punished by dismissal from the congregation, while the priest is "often only moved to another parish -- or sent for studies."

In her report, McDonald wrote that priests sometimes exploit the financial dependency of young sisters or take advantage of spiritual direction and the sacrament of reconciliation to extort sexual favors.

McDonald cites eight factors she believes give rise to the problem:

- The fact that celibacy and/or chastity are not values in some countries.
- The inferior position of women in society and the church. In some circumstances "a sister ... has been educated to regard herself as an inferior, to be subservient and to obey."

"It is understandable then, that a sister finds it impossible to refuse a cleric who asks for sexual favours. These men are seen as 'authority figures' who must be obeyed."

“Moreover, they are usually more highly educated and they have received a much more advanced theological formation than the sisters. They may use false theological arguments to justify their requests and behaviour. The sisters are easily impressed by these arguments. One of these goes as follows:

“ ‘We are both consecrated celibates. That means that we have promised not to marry. However, we can have sex together without breaking our vows.’ ”

- The AIDS pandemic, which means sisters are more likely to be seen as “safe.”
- Financial dependence created by low stipends for sisters laboring in their home countries or inadequate support for sisters sent abroad for studies. The problem of sexual abuse in Africa is most common, according to many observers, among members of diocesan religious congregations with little money and no network of international support.
- A poor understanding of consecrated life, both by the sisters and also by bishops, priests, and lay people.
- Recruitment of candidates by congregations that lack adequate knowledge of the culture.
- Sisters sent abroad to Rome and other countries for studies are often “too young and/or immature,” lack language skills, preparation and other kinds of support, and “frequently turn to seminarians and priests for help,” creating the potential for exploitation.

“I do not wish to imply that only priests and bishops are to blame and that the sisters are simply their victims,” McDonald wrote. “No, sisters can sometimes be only too willing and can also be naïve.”

- Silence. “Perhaps another contributing factor is the ‘conspiracy of silence’ surrounding this issue,” McDonald wrote. “Only if we can look at it honestly will we be able to find solutions.”

The American priest who gave a similar account of sexual abuse of women religious is Fr. Robert J. Vitillo, then of Caritas and now executive director of the U.S. bishops’ Campaign for Human Development. In March 1994, a month after O’Donohue wrote her report, Vitillo spoke about the problem to a theological study group at Boston College. Vitillo has extensive knowledge of Africa based on regular visits for his work. His talk, which focused on several moral and ethical issues related to AIDS, was titled, “Theological Challenges Posed by the Global Pandemic of HIV/AIDS.”

‘Necessary to mention’

Vitillo, a priest of the Paterson, N.J., diocese, declined requests from *NCR* for an interview on the content of his talk.

He told the gathering at Boston College that nuns had been targeted by men,

particularly clergy, who may have previously frequented prostitutes.

“The last ethical issue which I find especially delicate but necessary to mention,” he said, “involves the need to denounce sexual abuse which has arisen as a specific result of HIV/AIDS. In many parts of the world, men have decreased their reliance on commercial sex workers because of their fear of contracting HIV. ... As a result of this widespread fear, many men (and some women) have turned to young (and therefore presumably uninfected) girls (and boys) for sexual favors. Religious women have also been targeted by such men, and especially by clergy who may have previously frequented prostitutes. I myself have heard the tragic stories of religious women who were forced to have sex with the local priest or with a spiritual counselor who insisted that this activity was ‘good’ for the both of them.

“Frequently, attempts to raise these issues with local and international church authorities have met with deaf ears,” said Vitillo. “In North America and in some parts of Europe, our church is already reeling under the pedophilia scandals. How long will it take for this same institutional church to become sensitive to these new abuse issues which are resulting from the pandemic?”

The specific circumstances outlined in the O’Donohue report are as follows:

- In some instances, candidates to religious life had to provide sexual favors to priests in order to acquire the necessary certificates and/or recommendations to work in a diocese.
- In several countries, sisters are troubled by policies that require them to leave the congregation if they become pregnant, while the priest involved is able to continue his ministry. Beyond fairness is the question of social justice, since the sister is left to raise the child as a single parent, “often with a great deal of stigmatization and frequently in very poor socioeconomic circumstances. I was given examples in several countries where such women were forced into becoming a second or third wife in a family because of lost status in the local culture. The alternative, as a matter of survival, is to go ‘on the streets’ as prostitutes” and thereby “expose themselves to the risk of HIV, if not already infected.”
- “Superior generals I have met were extremely concerned about the harassment sisters were experiencing from priests in some areas. One superior of a diocesan congregation, where several sisters became pregnant by priests, has been at a complete loss to find an appropriate solution. Another diocesan congregation has had to dismiss over 20 sisters because of pregnancy, again in many cases by priests.
- “Some priests are recommending that sisters take a contraceptive, misleading them that ‘the pill’ will prevent transmission of HIV. Others have actually encouraged abortion for sisters with whom they have been involved. Some Catholic medical professionals employed in

Catholic hospitals have reported pressure being exerted on them by priests to procure abortions in those hospitals for religious sisters.

- “In a number of countries, members of parish councils and of small Christian communities are challenging their pastors because of their relationships with women and young girls generally. Some of these women are wives of the parishioners. In such circumstances, husbands are angry about what is happening, but are embarrassed to challenge their parish priest. Some priests are known to have relations with several women, and also to have children from more than one liaison. Laypeople spoke with me about the concerns in this context stating that they are waiting for the day when they will have dialogue homilies. This, they volunteered, will afford them an opportunity to challenge certain priests on the sincerity of their preaching and their apparent double standards. In one country visited, I was informed that the presbytery in a particular parish was attacked by parishioners armed with guns because they were angry with the priests because of their abuse of power and the betrayal of trust which their actions and lifestyles reflected.
- “In another country a recent convert from Islam (one of two daughters who became Christians) was accepted as a candidate to a local religious congregation. When she went to her parish priest for the required certificates, she was subjected to rape by the priest before being given the certificates. Having been disowned by her family because of becoming a Christian, she did not feel free to return home. She joined the congregation and soon afterwards found she was pregnant. To her mind, the only option for her was to leave the congregation, without giving the reason. She spent 10 days roaming the forest, agonizing over what to do. Then she decided to go and talk to the bishop, who called in the priest. The priest accepted the accusation as true and was told by the bishop to go on a two-week retreat.
- “Since the 1980s in a number of countries sisters are refusing to travel alone with a priest in a car because of fear of harassment or even rape. Priests have also on occasion abused their position in their role as pastors and spiritual directors and utilized their spiritual authority to gain sexual favors from sisters. In one country, women superiors have had to request the bishop or men superiors to remove chaplains, spiritual directors or retreat directors after they abused sisters.”

Those most directly affected are the women abused, wrote O’Donohue. The effects extend, however, to the wider community and include disillusionment and cynicism. The abused and others in the community “find the foundation of their faith is suddenly shattered.”

Many whose faith has been shattered are from families that look unfavorably on religious vocations and who “question why celibacy should be so strongly

proclaimed by the same people who are seemingly involved in sexually exploiting others. This is seen as hypocrisy or at least as promoting double standards,” O’Donohue wrote.

Some observers say that in the wake of such reports, steps have been taken to address the problem.

New guidelines

Wolf, the Benedictine leader in Rome, said, “Several monasteries already have guidelines in case a monk is accused of sexual misconduct, taking care of the individuals concerned, the victim included. I pushed this question in our congregation. We need sincerity and justice.”

A Vatican official told *NCR* that “there are initiatives at multiple levels” to raise awareness about the potential for sexual abuse in religious life. The official cited efforts within conferences of religious superiors, within bishops’ conferences, and within particular communities and dioceses.

Most of these, the official said, were steps the Vatican is “aware of” and “supporting” rather than organizing or initiating.

The Vatican official was willing to speak anonymously about the problem with *NCR*.

The official noted two signs that the culture in the church is changing. In specific cases, the official said, the response from church leaders is more aggressive and swift; and in general, there is a climate within religious life that these things have to be discussed. “Talking about it is the first step towards a solution,” the official said.

Church officials have not always, however, been open to such exchanges. McDonald wrote in her 1998 report that in March of that year she had spoken to the standing committee of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar, the consortium of African bishops’ conferences, on the problem of sexual abuse of sisters.

“Since most of what I gave was based on reports coming from diocesan congregations and Conferences of Major Superiors in Africa, I felt very convinced of the authenticity of what I was saying,” McDonald wrote.

Yet, “the bishops present felt that it was disloyal of the sisters to have sent such reports outside their dioceses,” McDonald wrote. “They said that the sisters in question should go to their diocesan bishop with these problems.”

“Of course,” she wrote, “this would be the ideal. However, the sisters claim that they have done so time and time again. Sometimes they are not well received. In some instances they are blamed for what has happened. Even when they are listened to sympathetically, nothing much seems to be done.”

Worth talking about

Whatever positive steps have been taken, the problem remains a live concern for religious women. In an interview at her home in Kansas City, Mo., Fangman, the nun who raised the issue last September at a gathering of Benedictine abbots in Rome, told *NCR* that she had heard the stories about sisters being sexually abused by priests during informal discussions at meetings of abbesses and prioresses worldwide.

“The sisters who brought it up were deeply hurt by it and found it very painful -- and very painful to talk about,” she said. Because of the pain that she and others were hearing, “we decided that it was worth also beginning to talk about in a more open way, and we had the opportunity at our regular meeting with the Congress of Abbots,” she said.

Fangman said her report to the Benedictine abbots was based on the conversations with sisters and on the material in O’Donohue’s reports.

Fangman’s talk was published in a recent issue of the *Alliance for International Monasticism Bulletin*, a mission magazine of the order.

O’Donohue’s report was prepared in a similar spirit: in hope of promoting change. She wrote in her report that she had prepared it “after much profound reflection and with a deep sense of urgency since the subjects involved touch the very core of the church’s mission and ministry.”

The information on abuse of nuns by priests “comes from missionaries (men and women); from priests, doctors and other members of our loyal ecclesial family,” she wrote. “I have been assured that case records exist for several of the incidents” described in the report, she said, “and that the information is not just based on hearsay.”

The 23 countries listed in her 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.

Her hope, she wrote, is that the report “will consequently motivate appropriate action especially on the part of those in positions of church leadership and those responsible for formation.”

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