

Nuns 'sex slaves' scandal fresh blow to Catholic church

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Pope Francis's public admission that priests have used nuns as "sexual slaves" marks a new chapter in the crisis rocking the church (AFP Photo/Andreas SOLARO)

Vatican City (AFP) - Pope Francis's public admission that priests have used nuns as "sexual slaves" -- and may still be doing so -- marks a new chapter in the abuse crisis rocking the Catholic church.

"It is the first time that the pope, but also the church as an institution, has publicly admitted this abuse is taking place, and that's hugely important," Lucetta Scaraffia, editor of the Vatican's women's magazine, told AFP on Wednesday.

The pontiff on Tuesday said Catholic priests and bishops had been sexually abusing nuns, and that his predecessor Benedict XVI had dissolved a religious order of women because of "sexual slavery on the part of priests and the founder".

The Church has "suspended several clerics" and the Vatican has been "working (on the issue) for a long time," he said.

The abuse was "still going on, because it's not something that just goes away like that. On the contrary," he added.

The Catholic church has had to contend with a wave of cases involving paedophile priests in countries worldwide from Ireland and the United States to Australia.

Francis's comment followed a rare outcry last week from the Vatican's women's magazine, "Women Church World", over the rape of nuns.

It said the victims felt forced to have abortions or raise children not recognised by their priest fathers.

- 'Silence enables rapists' -

"Many complaints have been filed with the Vatican and have not been followed up," said Scaraffia, who raised the issue in the February issue of "Women Church World", a supplement distributed with the Vatican's Osservatore Romano newspaper.

"I very much hope that a commission will be set up to investigate, and that nuns expert in the issue will be called to take part," she told AFP.

"They could move quickly with trials, and above all raise awareness because silence is what allows rapists to continue to rape," she added.

Scaraffia said the clerical abuse of nuns was a global issue, but one particularly prevalent in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Reports of such abuse are known to have been made from Chile to the Democratic Republic of Congo, Italy, India, Kenya, Peru and Ukraine.

Those abused "do not find it easy to speak out. They fear retaliation against them and their congregations," Scaraffia said.

She said the issue was abusive power relationships, with clerics controlling everything from nuns' vocations to their salaries.

"It's a very difficult situation which has its roots in the nuns' dependence within the church. They are not recognised as equals."

- 'Strip priests of power' -

The congregation of nuns dissolved under Benedict was the Sisters Mariales d'Israel, a spokesman for the parent order said.

Francis said Benedict had attempted to look into the order before he become pope. As Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, he had headed the Vatican department that investigates sexual abuse, but his efforts had been

"blocked".

Francis did not say by whom.

The Argentine pontiff also alluded to an ongoing investigation into another community, without naming it, but believed to be the Community of St. Jean in France.

That community admitted in 2013 that the priest who founded it had behaved "in ways that went against chastity" with several women in the order, according to French Catholic newspaper La Croix.

Francis's admission of the problem was "the umpteenth blow to the church's image, but also an occasion to show that change really is under way," Scaraffia said.

The key is "to strip priests of their air of power, which is what allows them to behave this way".

She admitted there was "great resistance" to investigating abuse claims within the church and uncovering predator priests. Yet she added that there had initially been reluctance to address the clerical paedophilia crisis, "but that was overcome".