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Religious Life



Nuns wave as Pope Francis delivers his blessing from the window of his studio overlooking St.Peter's Square, at the Vatican, on June 7, 2020. Pope Francis on Saturday, Dec. 11, 2021 drew attention to a taboo problem that the Vatican has long ignored or downplayed: the abuses of power by mother superiors against nuns who, because of their vows of obedience, have little recourse but to obey. (AP Photo/Andrew Medichini)

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Pope Francis on Dec.11 drew attention to a problem that the Vatican has long sought to downplay: the abuses of power by mother superiors against nuns who, because of their vows of obedience, have little recourse but to obey.

During an audience with members of the Vatican's congregation for religious orders, Francis cited a new investigative expose of the problem written by a reporter for the Holy See's media, Salvatore Cernuzio.

Francis noted that the book, "Veil of Silence: Abuse, Violence, Frustrations in Female Religious Life," doesn't detail "striking" cases of violence and abuse "but rather the everyday abuses that harm the strength of the vocation."

The book, published in Italy last month, contains 11 cases of current or former religious sisters who suffered abuses at the hands of their superiors. Most were psychological and spiritual abuses and often resulted in the women leaving or being thrown out of their communities and questioning their faith in God and the church. Some ended up on the streets, others found refuge in a home for abused women.

The book follows an article on the same topic by the Vatican-approved Jesuit journal La Civilta Cattolica in 2020 and earlier reports in the Vatican's women's magazine about the sexual abuse of nuns by priests and exploitation of them by the male church hierarchy for free domestic labor.

The new book peels back another layer of the more insidious forms of psychological abuses committed by superiors against their own nuns, which have long been covered up by a veil of secrecy. It contains a devastating essay by one of the highest-ranking women at the Vatican, Sr. Natalie Becquart, who said the cases must force the church to look at the sometimes toxic reality of life in religious orders, tend to the victims and prevent future abuses from occurring.

She said it also reinforces the need for the Catholic hierarchy to ensure that priests and nuns are trained in the correct way to exercise obedience and authority, saying the erroneous application of both had led to the problem.

Francis has tried to crack down on the near-absolute power enjoyed by religious and lay superiors as well as the proliferation of new religious movements, some of which have seen horrific cases of sexual, spiritual and other forms of abuse committed by their charismatic founders. The Vatican has recently imposed term limits for leaders and is applying a more rigorous process for new groups to be approved in the church.

The Jesuit pope, who knows well the dynamic of religious community life, told the members of the Vatican congregation Saturday that there is always the threat that founders of religious orders or new religious movements will assume too much power and exercise it improperly.

The risk, he warned, is that they claim to be the only ones who can interpret the particular spirit of the movement “as if they were above the church.”

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