Arts and Media



A still from the new documentary "Nuns vs. The Vatican". (Black Catholic Messenger/Film2 Productions/Mighty Entertainment)

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“Nuns vs. The Vatican,” a searing new documentary from director Lorena Luciano, is an exercise in accompaniment and — despite its flaws — has the power to shift the broader understanding of the Catholic Church’s mercurial response to clergy sex abuse.

At the center of the film is the largely unrecognized phenomenon of abuse perpetrated against women religious, with a particular focus on the notorious former Jesuit priest-artist Marko Rupnik and his now-shuttered Loyola Community in Slovenia.

Though he is just one of several villains in the narrative, he is at once the ultimate symbol of religious corruption at the expense of vulnerable women, having engaged in spiritual and sexual abuse over the course of 30 years. The film follows several of his victims and their unheard cries for help, in the form of complaints sent to bishops, the Jesuit order, and the Vatican itself.



Former Loyola Community members Gloria Branciani, left, and Mirjam Kovac in "Nuns vs. The Vatican". (Black Catholic Messenger/Film2 Productions/Mighty

Entertainment)

“It was the darkest place of my life. I felt dead, like I didn’t exist at all,” says Gloria Branciani, a former member of the Loyola Community who left after being abused by Rupnik and ignored by Church authorities.

”I didn’t know that other nuns were involved.”

The film delves into the institutional cover-up of sexual crimes against religious sisters and nuns — including the alleged destruction of abuse records and complaint letters, retaliation against victims, and even censorship of journalists.

On some counts, the film seems overly credulous — not of the victims, to be sure, but of third-party advocates. In nearly consecutive scenes, for example, an expert intimates that cases of abuse against women religious are kept under impenetrable secrecy, but also that she knows certain records were burned by a rogue Slavic bishop.

During the film’s climax, the late Pope Francis is described as lying to the press about whether the Vatican was truly looking into the larger scale of abuse against nuns when, in 2019, he became the first pope to admit such crimes have occurred. The accusation of secrecy again clashes with a selective omniscience of Vatican intrigue.



A still from the documentary film “Nuns vs. The Vatican” written and directed by Lorena Luciano. (OSV News/Film2 Productions/Mighty Entertainment)

The larger portrayal of the Catholic Church in “Nuns vs. The Vatican” as an irredeemable absolute monarchy is, of course, not new, and in some ways true. But even the film’s own content — by the end credits, at least — puts the lie to such a notion, with one interlocutor, the Jesuit priest Hans Zollner, going to far as to claim that the hierarchy’s lackluster response to abuse is in fact fueled by its lack of centralized mechanisms in certain facets.

As with many matters in the Church, simple (albeit satisfying) explanations do not suffice and uneven assumptions can do more harm than good in the work of reform.

That the film’s (literal) loudest voices are not themselves survivors seemed an inescapable feature by the final stretch of the film, which sees Branciani participating in a press conference in Rome to call the Church to account. Her calm, weighty, and indeed spiritual testimony of pain and survival is immediately followed by that of her lawyer, who shouts that Rupnik should go to prison.

While it is true that he and others should face justice for their crimes, one can gather from the survivors in the film that they are less concerned with Rupnik than with the women he abused. It is a monstrous disgrace that he walks free in Italy today pending the outcome of a canonical trial, but just as with, say, a mass shooter in America, he ought not be made the center of the story.

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Throughout its runtime, “Nuns vs. The Vatican” makes use of shrieking, slasher-esque music at the very mention of Rupnik’s name, apparently in an attempt to call attention to the horrific nature of his abuse. It is, however, an unnecessary and distracting element in a story that already does well, by means of its survivors’ voices, to bring out the devastation he and others like him wrought by their misdeeds.

(Moreover, if the filmmakers had wished to really get at the tougher issues of abuse of women religious, it would have devoted more than passing mention to Rupnik’s chief collaborator in his abuse, Loyola Community cofounder Ivanka Hosta.)

None of this makes the documentary a losing effort overall, as its subject matter alone makes the film worth a viewing. Its pacing, sense of visuals, and consultation of an international array of experts are also commendable. I just wish that, somehow, the film had stuck to its guns: the voices of the women so heinously victimized by predator Catholic priests.

I think it can truly be said that a surefire way to lose the plot in the battle against Catholic clerical sex abuse is to background its victims in an attempt to settle a score with a wayward Church. “Nuns vs. The Vatican” only narrowly avoids this fate.

This article originally ran at Black Catholic Messenger.