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FRANCE INVESTIGATION

Revealed: the 25 bishops who covered up sex crimes

MARCH 23, 2017 | BY DAPHNÉ GASTALDI, MATHIEU MARTINIÈRE, MATHIEU PÉRISSE (WE REPORT) ET DONATIEN HUET

The French Catholic Church has for years protected priests and others under its authority who were accused of sexual assaults, and paedophile crimes in particular. This Mediapart investigation reveals how 25 bishops, five of who are still active, were directly involved in protecting 24 people, mostly priests, accused of sexual abuse. They were among 32 alleged perpetrators of sex crimes who are identified here as having been protected by the Church, and whose alleged victims total 339. The method employed often involved the transfer of the alleged perpetrators, a number of who have now been convicted for sex crimes, to distant geographical locations both in France and abroad. Daphné Gastaldi, Mathieu Martinière and Mathieu Périssé report (graphics by Donatien Huet).

Several dozen priests accused of sexual assaults were knowingly and methodically protected by 25 bishops who were aware of their alleged crimes and who never alerted the judicial authorities to the events, Mediapart can reveal in a year-long investigation into cases of sexual abuse, either alleged or since confirmed, involving members of the French Catholic Church.

The Catholic Church turned a blind eye to the cases of more than 300 victims of abuse across France, according to hundreds of documents, including judicial reports, witness accounts, letters and archived press reports gathered in this investigation.

The majority of the perpetrators eventually became the subject of judicial investigations, after which some were sent for trial and convicted, while others among them are currently formally placed under investigation, a legal status one step short of being charged and which implies that there is serious or corroborative evidence they committed an offence.

But there are also cases of formal complaints which the French justice system has dismissed on the grounds of the statute of limitations (under which prosecution of an alleged crime is impossible due to the length of time that has passed before a complaint was lodged). We have chosen to cite the cases in this category when evidence we have obtained (judicial documents, confessions, and concordant witness accounts) support the accusations.

This investigation has established that from the 1960s to date, and notably since the year 2000, at least 32 priests and other religious and lay figures accused of sexual crimes against minors and adults were protected by the French Catholic church both in France and abroad. A total of 25 bishops, five of whom are still in activity, were alerted to the evidence of sexual abuse but never lodged formal complaints with the police or judicial authorities. The scandal involves 339 alleged victims.

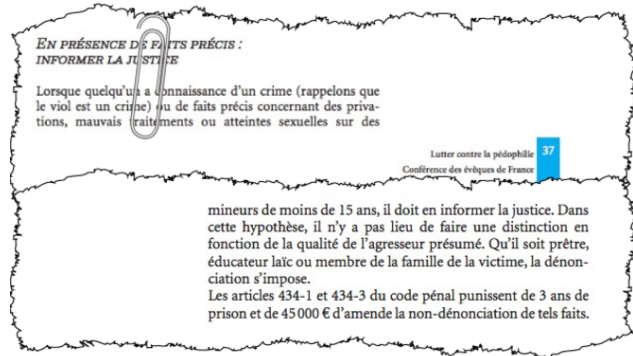
The French Catholic Church insists that the events are a thing of the past, and numerous bishops have claimed that the Church's attitude towards sexual abuse allegations changed in the early 2000s. According to that account, the sex abuse cases implicating members of the Church that emerged last year (see [here \(https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/france/150316/french-pm-demands-cardinal-take-responsibility-paedophile-case\)](https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/france/150316/french-pm-demands-cardinal-take-responsibility-paedophile-case), [here \(https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/france/300316/victims-who-unmasked-child-sex-abuse-scandal-catholic-church-france\)](https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/france/300316/victims-who-unmasked-child-sex-abuse-scandal-catholic-church-france), and [here \(https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/france/290516/how-french-catholic-church-discr](https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/france/290516/how-french-catholic-church-discr)

etly-relocates-sex-abuse-priests-avoid-scandal)) were isolated and old, and covered by the statute of limitations.

Our investigation shows that to be false. Half of the cases of alleged sexual abuse which were covered up by the Church concern incidents that occurred after the year 2000. A total of 28 clerics were transferred to other geographical locations following the disclosure of the alleged abuse, and without the justice system being alerted to the events.

However, the law is very clear on the requirement that anyone who is aware of evidence of such crimes must inform the relevant authorities, and a document prepared by the Conference of Bishops of France (the CEF), the French Catholic Church's Episcopal assembly, underlines this. First published in 2002, and re-published in 2010 and 2017, the CEF document (see right), entitled 'Fighting paedophilia', warns:

“When someone is made aware of a crime (it should be noted that rape is a crime) or precise facts concerning privation, mistreatment or sexual assault on minors of less than 15 years of age, they must inform the justice authorities. In this case, no distinction should be made on the basis of the status of the alleged perpetrator. That they be a priest, a lay tutor or a member of the victim's family, denunciation is imperative. Articles 434-1 and 434-3 of the penal code provide for a punishment of three years in prison and a fine of 45,000 euros for the non-denunciation of such acts.”



An extract of the document 'Fighting paedophilia' published by the Conference of Bishops of France. © DR

Of the 32 alleged perpetrators identified in this investigation, 24 were directly covered up by a total of 25 bishops. The other cases were covered up by superiors, priests and others who were alerted to the events and who took no action. None of the prelates were ever prosecuted for non-denunciation bar one, Pierre Pican, who is today bishop emeritus of Bayeux-Lisieux, and who was in 2001 handed a three-year suspended prison sentence for “non-denunciation of sexual assault”.

Of the 25 bishops involved in hiding the cases, five are still active. They are Philippe Barbarin, cardinal and archbishop of Lyon; archbishop of Besançon Jean-Luc Bouilleret; the bishop of Bayonne, Marc Aillet; the bishop of Le Mans, Yves Le Saux, and Bernard Fellay, a bishop who heads the Catholic traditionalist Society of Saint-Pius X.

Since he was appointed archbishop of Lyon in 2002, Barbarin was made aware of sexual abuse allegations against five priests, but took no steps to alert the judicial authorities. Evidence of the abuse was provided by families, in detailed correspondence, and in some cases by the confessions of the priests themselves. Despite Barbarin's inaction, two of the priests were subsequently prosecuted and convicted, two have been placed under investigation while the results of a canonical enquiry into the case of the fifth have been passed on to the justice authorities.

Jean-Luc Bouilleret, now archbishop of Besançon, was head of the diocese of Amiens in northern France when, during the mid-2000s, he was informed, by three priests and the family of the alleged victim, of a case of sexual assault by priest Stéphane Gotoghian. “In the course of my ministry in Amiens, I held a meeting with a family who told me this: ‘something happened between our son and such-and-such a priest’”, Bouilleret told Mediapart.

The related incident was sufficiently serious for Bouilleret to urge the family to lodge a formal complaint with the authorities, but which they did not do. Bouilleret said that he sought the advice of the Amiens public prosecutor, and “orally indicated every element” he was aware of to the prosecutor’s office. He gave no written account of the allegations, nor did he launch an internal enquiry.

The public prosecutor’s office took no action, apparently for lack of evidence. Meanwhile, Father Gotoghian escaped a suspension from his duties, although he was barred from activities with teenage children. In 2014, he was convicted of five sexual assaults of underage boys between 2002 and 2012, and sentenced to three years in prison (18 months suspended).

In Bayonne, south-west France, a priest who was the subject of several allegations of sexual crimes was protected by the Church for more than 25 years. As of his appointment as bishop of Bayonne in 2009, Marc Aillet was made aware of the accusations of paedophile acts by Father Jean-Francois Sarramagnan, both by the family of one of his alleged victims and in a confession from the priest himself. The bishop only alerted the justice authorities seven years later, in 2016, when a flood of revelations of paedophile cases involving the French Catholic Church was reported in the media.

In Le Mans, north-west France, Bishop Yves Le Saux received a letter in 2010 from the family of an alleged victim of sexual abuse committed by priest Max de Guibert, who Le Saux allowed to continue to work with groups of minors. “I only knew of the case as of my arrival,” Le Saux told Mediapart in an interview last November. “Already, before me, he was removed from his ministry.” Le Saux said the family who wrote to him had not wanted to lodge a formal complaint with the authorities.

It was not until 2015 that the priest was formally placed under investigation by the justice authorities on suspicion of committing rape and sexual assaults against minors between 1993 and 2007, which he has denied.

Our investigation has also learnt that Bernard Fellay, the bishop who heads the Catholic traditionalist Society of Saint-Pius X, was informed of allegations of sexual abuse committed by two of the fraternity’s priests, but never alerted the authorities to the fact. One of the cases involved Father Philippe Peignot, who remained in contact with youngsters for many years, notably scouts. The other case involved Father Christophe Roisnel who, after the sexual abuse allegations emerged, was transferred to a monastery in Burgundy. In 2014, he was formally placed under investigation by the justice authorities for rape, torture and barbarous acts against adult victims.

This investigation has found compelling evidence that, beginning in the 1960s, at least 339 people were the victims of confirmed or alleged sexual abuse by priests and other representatives of the French Catholic Church, and 288 of the victims were aged under 15 at the time of the events. The cases of just 165 victims led to a judicial investigation after preliminary enquiries by the police. Most of the other cases were dismissed on the grounds of the statute of limitations.

Regarding the perpetrators of the crimes covered up by the Church, the most shocking cases in terms of the number of victims of any one individual were that of Father Bernard Preynat in Lyon, south-east France, (72 alleged victims) and Father Pierre-Étienne Albert in Rodez, south-west France, (58 alleged victims).

Of the 32 alleged perpetrators protected by the Church and listed in the above graph, 17 have been convicted of sex crimes, six are currently placed under investigation in judicial probes, four are implicated in ongoing investigations, and the cases of three others against who complaints were lodged were dismissed under the statute of limitations. As for the remaining two; Johannes Rivoire is the subject of an international arrest warrant issued by Canada, while no judicial investigation has been opened into allegations against Robert M.

The victims identified in our investigation include those who were adults at the time of the events. The denunciation of sexual abuse of adults is required by French law only in particular circumstances. But in several cases of abuse against adults, our investigation has found clear evidence of negligence on the part of the Church, notably when the vulnerable victims were reluctant to lodge a formal complaint with the authorities against the perpetrator, such as in [the case of priest Tony Anatrella in Paris \(https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/france/070516/french-catholic-church-new-sex-abuse-scandal-centred-psychoanalyst-priest\)](https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/france/070516/french-catholic-church-new-sex-abuse-scandal-centred-psychoanalyst-priest), or when the victim informed only representatives of the Church, as in the case of Father Philippe de Morand in Lyon. In that latter example, the father of the priest's victim had alerted Philippe Barbarin, cardinal and archbishop of Lyon, about the events.

Contrary to regular claims by the French Catholic Church that the cases of sexual abuse date from decades past, half of those cited in this investigation, and who were given protection by the Church, committed their crimes, alleged or confirmed, after the year 2000.

These include the case of priest Michel Chidaine, who was sentenced in January 2017 by a court in Clermont-Ferrand, central France, to five years in prison, three suspended, for paedophile crimes committed between 2008 and 2010 while on mission in the Central African Republic. Another is the case of Stéphane Gotoghian, a priest sentenced in 2014 to three years in prison, 18 months suspended, for five sexual assaults of minors in Amiens, northern France, between 2002 and 2012. Before these cases came to trial, three archbishops - Hippolyte Simon, archbishop emeritus of Clermont-Ferrand, Jacques Noyer, archbishop emeritus of Amiens, and Jean-Luc Bouilleret, formerly archbishop of Amiens and now archbishop of Besançon - were separately informed of the priests' crimes but took no action.

Of the 32 identified here as accused of sexual abuse, 28 were transferred to other geographical locations after their immediate hierarchy – bishops and others – were made aware of the accusations against them, but failed to alert the police or justice authorities to the situation.

The mode of operation varies little from one diocese to another; as soon as the first complaints emerge, the priest suspected of sexual abuse is given “sabbatical leave”, and then posted to another region, more often in a rural area, or another diocese.

Among those transferred from urban to rural areas within the same diocese is priest Bernard Preynat, who was moved from a suburb in the city of Lyon to the region surrounding the town of Roanne in central France. Among those moved from one diocese to another is priest Jean Bréheret, who was transferred from the town of Angers, in north-west France, to Saint-Flour, a small commune about 500 kilometres away in the Cantal region of central France.

There were also the cases of accused priests who were sent to work abroad, or conversely who were brought back to France from the overseas missions where the alleged offences took place, such as priest Régis Peillon who was brought back to France from Ivory Coast where, according to his own confession, he sexually abused several minors. Last year he was given a one-year suspended jail sentence for sexually abusing a minor and an adult following his return to France in 2008.

This investigation charts other similar cases (see graphic above) of transfers abroad, and from abroad, of clerics suspected of sexual crimes. These include: a priest transferred from Guinea-Conakry, a former French colony in West Africa where he allegedly committed rape and other sexual offences on minors, to the Sacré-Cœur community in central France; a Lyon priest sent on missionary work in Africa; an oblate moved from Belgium to Lourdes in south-west France; a monk transferred from central France to Romania and a priest moved from Tours in west-central France to Bologna in Italy. By moving the clerics from one country to another, they were

distanced from the potential judicial consequences of their acts, and even also, in certain cases, from problems with the higher ecclesiastic authorities.

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BY DAPHNÉ GASTALDI

In the dioceses, the task is not as easy as it is for the more autonomous religious communities and missionary orders. “The advantage of the communities is that they have access to international networks, to places in Africa or in Asia, which allows them to recycle clerics,” said Dutch theologian and journalist Hendro Munsterman.

The method is tried and tested and has been in place for centuries. “It corresponds with what was already practiced in medieval times,” commented Arnaud Fossier, professor in medieval history at the University of Burgundy. “They were made to serve penitence. They were sent on their way to Rome on sorts of pilgrimages. They would see the pope or his judges and confess. The confessor would pardon them and they would be reintegrated under him. They were displaced in order to avoid the scandal of being reintegrated in the same parish. The procedure was not entirely recorded, but as of the 13th century there were letters kept which were given to those who served penitence by their pilgrimage to Rome and which declared the end of [*their*] suspension.”

Daphné Gastaldi, Mathieu Martinière and Mathieu Périssé are independent journalists based in Lyon, and are members of the freelance journalist collective group *We Report* (<http://www.wereport.fr/>). They are the authors of a book published this week in France (in partnership with Mediapart and television channel *France 2*'s investigative programme *Cash Investigation*) entitled *Église, la mécanique du silence* (The Church, a Mechanism of Silence), priced 20 euros (publisher: JC Lattès).

The French version of this article can be found **here** (<https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/200317/vingt-cinq-eveques-ont-couvert-des-abus-sexuels>).

English version by Graham Tearse

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