



## THE PROBLEM OF THE SEXUAL ABUSE OF AFRICAN RELIGIOUS IN AFRICA AND IN ROME

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IN AFRICA AND IN ROME

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PAPER FOR THE COUNCIL OF "16"  
Marie McDonald, MSOLA

This talk refers mainly to AFRICA and to AFRICAN SISTERS, PRIESTS AND BISHOPS. This is not because the problem is exclusively an African one, but because the group which met to prepare the input for today's gathering were drawing 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.

This paper touches only one albeit painful reality in the African Church. We are well aware of and grateful for, the immense good which has and is being accomplished by clergy and religious, living integrated and evangelically fruitful lives. We only need to remember those Bishops, priests, and religious in Africa who, in recent years have shed their blood for Christ's cause and for the people committed to their care. It is precisely because of our love for the Church and for Africa that we feel so distressed about the problem we present to you today.

Many disturbing stories could be told. However, since everyone here knows that this problem exists and that in spite of very many attempts to improve the situation, it seems to be getting worse, instead of better, I shall therefore only expose the problem very briefly and concisely. I shall then try to suggest the main causes.

### The problem

1. Sexual harassment and even rape of sisters by priests and bishops is allegedly common.

Sometimes, when a sister becomes pregnant, the priest insists that she have

an abortion.

The sister is usually dismissed from her congregation while the priest is often only moved to another parish -- or sent for studies.

2. Many sisters become financially dependent upon priests who may ask for sexual favours in return.

3. Priests sometimes take advantage of spiritual direction and of the sacrament of Reconciliation to ask for sexual favours.

### **SOME CAUSES OF THESE ABUSES**

**CELIBACY/CHASTITY** is not a value in many countries.

Marriage may not be an option in some countries for an educated young woman because the "bride price" is too high.

Religious life could provide an alternative choice but is there a real choice for a chaste celibate life?

**THE INFERIOR POSITION OF WOMEN** in society and in the Church is another factor to be considered here.

It seems that a sister finds it impossible to refuse a priest who asks for sexual favours. She has been educated to regard herself as inferior, to be subservient and to obey -- even her younger brother.

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** has meant that sisters are more sought after by the clergy than before because they are thought to be "safe."

**FINANCE.** Many congregations of women struggle to find enough money to provide for their sisters and to educate them. Very often when sisters work for a diocese they are not paid a just salary.

Those who are sent abroad for studies are sometimes expected to send money to their congregations and families at home. In some countries outside Africa, e.g. U.S., African sisters are exploited with poor wages and inadequate health insurance in traditional ministries e.g. catechists that U.S. Congregations have moved away from.

**POOR UNDERSTANDING OF CONSECRATED LIFE.** Bishops, priests, lay people and sisters themselves do not understand religious life adequately, neither the meaning of the vows or the Charisms specific to each Institute.

**RECRUITMENT OF CANDIDATES** by Congregations who do not have a sufficient presence in the country, and who do not have enough knowledge of the culture.

Sometimes priests help in this active recruitment.

**STUDENT SISTERS** who are sent abroad to Rome (and elsewhere in Europe and U.S.) for studies often have special difficulties. One of these is that of finding suitable accommodation. Whereas residences are provided for seminarians and priests much less is done for sisters.

Sisters sent to study outside their own countries are often too young and/or immature. They lack guidance, support and in many cases solid religious formation.

Many sisters also lack the basic education necessary to undertake further studies, or they may have an insufficient knowledge of the language in which they are required to study.

These sisters frequently turn to seminarians and priests for help in writing essays. Sexual favours are, sometimes, the payment they have to make for such help.

I do not wish to imply that only Priests and Bishops are to blame and that the sisters are simply their victims. No, Sisters can sometimes be only too willing and can also be naïve.

**SILENCE** perhaps another contributing cause is the “conspiracy of silence” surrounding this issue. Only if we can look at it together honestly will we be able to find solutions.

In March of this year, I addressed the Bishops of the Standing Committee of SECAM on the “Problems Facing Religious Congregations.” The sexual abuse of sisters was put forward as one of the main problems. 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. The Bishops present felt that it was disloyal of the sisters to have sent such reports outside their own dioceses. They said that the sisters in question should go to their diocesan bishop with these problems. Of course, 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.

In formal and informal sessions, Superiors General in Rome have been hearing and sharing accounts of sexual abuse in the last few years.

It seems that the time has come for some concerted action.

We think this can best be done by helping one another to develop policies designed to face the problems before and after they arise.

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