

Abused Roman Catholic Nuns Reveal Stories of Rape and Forced Abortions



This is from the PBS NewsHour:

“Another scandal is engulfing the Catholic Church. At a time when the Vatican has taken its most concrete steps to address a long ordeal with sex abuse and coverups, a growing chorus of nuns is speaking out about the suffering they have endured at the hands of the priesthood, including rape, forced abortion, emotional abuse and labor exploitation. Special correspondent Christopher Livesay reports.”

Transcript

JUDY WOODRUFF: This week, Catholic bishops are meeting in Baltimore to discuss the priest sex abuse crisis in the American church and will vote on measures to hold themselves accountable.

Throughout the church, the Vatican has put in place new rules on reporting abuse, the most concrete steps the Vatican has taken to counter the crisis.

Most of the attention has focused on child victims, but as special correspondent Christopher Livesay reports from the Vatican, now, in the MeToo era, there's a growing chorus of nuns speaking out as survivors of abuse as well.

CHRISTOPHER LIVESAY: They're known as brides of Christ, revered for their quiet service, not for speaking out. But that's beginning to change.

DORIS WAGNER, Former Nun: Well, I joined the convent in 2003, and I was raped in 2008.

CHRISTOPHER LIVESAY: Raped, she says, by a priest. A devout Catholic from Germany, Doris Wagner was 24 years old, living and working at this religious community just outside the Vatican.

DORIS WAGNER: And he came into the room, closed the door behind him, was sitting on my right hand on the sofa. And he just started to undress me.

CHRISTOPHER LIVESAY: When she told her superiors, she says the priest went unpunished, allowing him to rape her again and again. But this whole time,

the perpetrator was still living in the same...

DORIS WAGNER: Yes.

CHRISTOPHER LIVESAY: So you had to actually see your rapist.

DORIS WAGNER: Every day.

CHRISTOPHER LIVESAY: Every day.

DORIS WAGNER: He was preaching at the chapel. He was giving me holy communion. He was sitting at breakfast, at lunch, at dinner on the same – at the same table. I was ironing his shirts.

CHRISTOPHER LIVESAY: Story after story like Wagner's is reaching a crescendo. In India, a bishop currently faces charges for repeatedly raping a former mother superior. And a recent investigation by the Associated Press found cases of abuse across four continents.

Now the Vatican can no longer ignore the scandal. This year, Pope Francis made a shocking admission and acknowledged what had been a longstanding dirty secret of the Roman Catholic Church, that some priests had been sexually abusing nuns.

It was a stain they could keep under wraps, that is, until the MeToo era. Now religious women are beginning to speak out, and a NunsToo era has been born. Helping break down that wall of silence was, of all things, a Vatican magazine, "Donne Chiesa Mondo," or "Women Church World."

Its all-women staff included former editor Lucetta Scaraffia. She listened to hundreds of stories from nuns, and, in February, published an article accusing the all-powerful priesthood of not only exploiting them for sex, but, first and foremost, for their labor.

LUCETTA SCARAFFIA, Former Editor, "Donne Chiesa Mondo" (through translator): It happens as high as the Vatican ministries, where women carry out secretarial work and translations, but they can never be promoted, and the men get all the credit. They also exploit nuns as Housekeepers. They do all of the cleaning, prepare all the food, without fixed hours, all day, every day. Priests see this almost as their right to take advantage of women.

CHRISTOPHER LIVESAY: They're not paid for their work. There's no chance of advancement. Some people have likened this mistreatment to slavery. Is that accurate?

LUCETTA SCARAFFIA (through translator): That's accurate. Given this habit of servitude, it's easy to understand how it can morph into sexual exploitation.

CHRISTOPHER LIVESAY: Doris Wagner says that's what happened to her in Rome.

DORIS WAGNER: I was only working in the kitchen, chopping vegetables, cleaning. Anybody who wants to become a nun wants to serve and wants to give herself to God. And that's why it's so easy to abuse nuns, because they are

so ready to listen to others who tell them how they are supposed to be.

Again and again, I was reproached for not walking right, not looking right, not sitting right, not talking right, because some men in the house had a problem with me.

CHRISTOPHER LIVESAY: When you say they had a problem with you?

DORIS WAGNER: They were, in a way, attracted to us.

CHRISTOPHER LIVESAY: And this was your fault?

DORIS WAGNER: It was our fault.

CHRISTOPHER LIVESAY: She says it was also her fault when she reported the priest's advances to her female superior.

DORIS WAGNER: She became furious. She literally jumped on her feet and was shouting at me, and she was very angry with me. And she said: "You are dangerous for him. Leave him alone."

LUCETTA SCARAFFIA (through translator): They tell them, keep quiet, or our congregation will be persecuted. These women can't even contemplate leaving, because they don't have any alternatives. They have no trade, no support group. They have severed ties with their families. So they are forced to endure this abuse. That often leads to pregnancy, and the priests or bishops force them to have abortions.

CHRISTOPHER LIVESAY: So, nuns are forced by the fathers of these children, by priests, to have abortions?

LUCETTA SCARAFFIA (through translator): Yes. And these poor women now have to live with the anguish of having committed a mortal sin. We have many testimonies from nuns who had more than one abortion in this way.

CHRISTOPHER LIVESAY: Testimonies that became too much for the Vatican to handle, she says. Soon after they were published, the director of the Vatican newspaper, Andrea Monda, told her that he would now be sitting in on the editorial meetings of her women's magazine. Monda denies any interference in the editorial process.

LUCETTA SCARAFFIA (through translator): There was an effort to suffocate our voice. So we decided, before we have suffocated, it would be better for us to resign.

CHRISTOPHER LIVESAY: And almost all of the women did indeed resign. Change, she says, is happening, thanks to nuns speaking out. This year, the Vatican held an extraordinary summit on sex abuse by priests. Some of the most powerful testimonies there came from nuns, such as Sister Veronica Adeshola Openibo from Nigeria, who read the riot act to a room full of the most powerful men in the Catholic Church.

SISTER VERONICA ADESHOLA OPENIBO, International Union of Superiors General: I

think of all the atrocities we have committed as members of the church. I'm saying we, not they, we.

CHRISTOPHER LIVESAY: Openibo sits on the executive board of the International Union of Superiors General, which counts some 450,000 women religious leaders. It's recently called on nuns across the world to report abuse, and held a rare meeting in Rome, where Pope Francis, surrounded by nearly 1,000 sisters, once again confessed that priests are abusing nuns.

POPE FRANCIS, Leader of Catholic Church (through translator): I'm aware of the problems. It's not just the sexual abuse of nuns. You didn't sign up to become some cleric's housekeeper, no.

CHRISTOPHER LIVESAY: On the sidelines of the meeting, the executive board agreed to an impromptu discussion with me.

SISTER VERONICA ADESHOLA OPENIBO: The church, as a church, has had so many cases and has been defending itself, like on a football field.

CHRISTOPHER LIVESAY: Can you provide any insight into what the pope could do to address and try fix this problem?

WOMAN: I think I know what we could do. The future is to create a culture of care, care at every level, an open space. It's not shameful.

SISTER CARMEN SAMMUT, International Union of Superiors General: And also to be able to say wherever we need to say it who the perpetrator was, because we would not want that person to continue to hurting other sisters.

SISTER SALLY HODGDON, International Union of Superiors: We can be a dangerous memory. We can call the church to what they are professing that they want to see changes made, but they don't happen.

CHRISTOPHER LIVESAY: Right after the meeting, Pope Francis made a surprise announcement, and issued a new rule, calling on local dioceses to create public and easily accessible offices to receive abuse claims. The rule also lays out a way to proceed when prelates are accused of a cover-up or carrying out abuse themselves. It's perhaps the pope's most concrete attempt to battle abuse. But critics say the law has a major weakness: It still keeps the handling of cases within the church, as opposed to involving outside authorities, and doesn't detail any specific punishments for prelates, like the one who raped Doris Wagner.

DORIS WAGNER: And they should make sure that everybody who is either a perpetrator or has protected perpetrators is legally persecuted.

CHRISTOPHER LIVESAY: Something that never happened to her rapist. Instead, she says he's still a priest in the same community today. The trauma was so unbearable, she says she almost committed suicide one day when she was high up on a balcony inside the Papal Palace, right in front of the pope.

DORIS WAGNER: And I could jump on the square. It would have been so easy. And my – you know, I had my leg already halfway up the wall.

CHRISTOPHER LIVESAY: Instead, she decided to speak out. It was a long process that eventually led to her leaving religious life. Today, she works as a headhunter (a person who provides employment recruiting services on behalf of the employer) back in her native Germany, and hopes that young women entering the convent today do so with open eyes.

DORIS WAGNER: She should be aware that sexual abuse of nuns exists, and that when – as long as victims don't speak out, perpetrators will just go on. So, I actually have the responsibility to speak.

CHRISTOPHER LIVESAY: For the "PBS NewsHour," I'm Christopher Livesay in Rome.