

LIBRE PENSEE, LYON

REMARKS ON CLERICAL CHILD ABUSE BY KEITH PORTEOUS WOOD

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The failure of the Catholic Church in France, the abuse commission and the French Republic to confront sexual abuse of minors in church environments.

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I pay tribute to the suffering and bravery of the victims here today.

However, please permit me to speak for a few minutes about the role of the Roman Catholic Church in France, the Church's Commission of Inquiry into Abuse, the Vatican and the worldwide Church.

Let us not forget also the role of the French Republic.

When you have listened to what I am going to say to you, I want you to ask all of these bodies the tough questions I will pose or imply. It is our duty to ask these questions and to demand answers.

They are all responsible for so many inexcusable actions and inactions, too many to describe during this short presentation. Now, let us remind ourselves of the scale and the effect of clerical abuse.

We know from the Church's Commission of Inquiry into Abuse — or C.I.A.S.E. as many know it — that, and I quote, "...after the family or friends, the Catholic Church is the first place where sexual violence occurs. 1.2% of French people who attended the Church as children were abused there."¹

The abuse is "massive".² Since 1950, there have been 330,000 child victims of sexual abuse connected with the Church. This is unlikely to equate less than a million child sexual abuse crimes. Crimes on such a scale could not have taken place without raising widespread suspicions.

Although it has been mandatory under French Law since 2000 to report knowledge of such crimes, there has only been a handful of prosecutions. Only around one in 50,000 victims has seen their abuser arrested.

These prosecutions were made possible because of the extraordinary courage of the victims.

¹ <https://www.la-croix.com/Religion/Abus-sexuels-lEglise-deflagration-rapport-Sauve-2022-10-05-1201236244>

² <https://www.ciase.fr/medias/Ciase-Final-Report-5-october-2021-english-version.pdf> pages 23/24

CIASE concludes that “60% of the victims have experienced what they consider to be strong or very strong disturbances in their emotional and sexual life, less strong but very real in their professional and social life”.

The Roman Catholic Church not only flouts the mandatory reporting law requiring disclosure of these crimes, but actively discourages compliance with it.

Why?

That is one of the questions you must ask.

Unfortunately, the methods applied by CIASE to the estimation of victims has not been employed in quantifying the number of abusive priests and clerics, which it describes as “sensitive”. It only provides what it describes defensively as a “minimum estimate” of around 3,000 abusive priests and clerics since 1950, based on what was found in files, which are likely to be seriously incomplete.

Even La Croix doubts the 3,000 figure (unacceptable though that is), as it suggests that no more than 3% of clerics are predatory paedophiles. There is no reason to believe in our opinion that the French rate of clergy abuse is lower than that of many other Catholic countries. In Australia, the figure was thought to be 7%³ of Catholic clerics and the Roman Catholic Church in New Zealand recently admitted that 14%⁴ of its diocesan clergy had been accused of child sexual abuse.

It is much more likely that the number of predatory paedophiles in the French Roman Catholic Church is many times that which CIASE claims. Were it to be fourteen or fifteen per cent of French clergy that are abusers, this brings down the average number of victims per predator to twelve from the completely implausible 60 (despite the Preynat example below) which would be the case with the claimed 3,000 abusive priests and clerics.⁵

3 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-australia-38877158>

4 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/01/new-zealands-catholic-church-admits-14-of-clergy-have-been-accused-of-abuse-since-1950>

5 <https://www.la-croix.com/Religion/Abus-sexuels-IEglise-deflagration-rapport-Sauve-2022-10-05-1201236244>
<https://www.ciase.fr/medias/Ciase-Final-Report-5-october-2021-english-version.pdf> pp 160-164

The French news agency Mediapart, in collaboration with the television station France 2⁶, found credible evidence that twenty-five Bishops had failed to report abuse, in defiance of the Law. I refer at the end to another guilty Bishop I found.

Five of these Bishops were still in office. Over the years, they had methodically protected thirty-two perpetrators of child sexual abuse. Not one of these Bishops has disputed the accusations. Not one has been prosecuted, with the exception of Cardinal Barbarin.

Why? This is another question you need to ask the French Republic to answer.

The Roman Catholic Church complained about the ethics of the methods used by the Mediapart and France 2 reporters as a pretext to evade participating in the programme.

You will all remember the notorious Bernard Preynat, who set up an independent boy scout group as a means of abusing the boy scouts entrusted to his care. A lawyer told the court that Preynat had abused between 3,000 and 4,000 boy scouts over two decades.⁷

Secondly, we come to the Church's culpability for the past.

Preynat's long-term abuse was known to four French Cardinals, including former Archbishop Barbarin, who also knew of abuse by four other priests. Yet for decades Preynat was appointed by the Church to numerous positions that brought him into contact with minors. The Church resisted defrocking him until 28 years after the abuse was brought to the Church's attention.

None of these Cardinals, nor any other cleric, reported these criminal acts to the civil authorities.

This is the law-breaking example being set by the highest Roman Catholic Church leaders in the French Republic and the Republic does not react.

Why?

This is another question that you must put to the French Republic.

Any victim or survivor who accepts financial settlements or 'gestures' from the Roman Catholic Church is usually bound by formal or informal obligations imposed by the Church's lawyers and insurers to take no civil or criminal action against the Church. This is another way in which the Church protects itself and the sex criminals amongst its clergy. Should this be legal; shouldn't the law be amended to allow victims to disregard any such undertakings?

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<https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/200317/vingt-cinq-eveques-ont-couvert-des-abus-sexuels>
https://www.francetvinfo.fr/societe/video-cash-investigation-un-pretre-condamne-pour-pedophilie-toujours-en-poste_2101749.html

7

https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Affaire_Bernard_Preynat

Over 40% of victims never disclose their abuse⁸, and of those who do, the Australian Commission found that on average victims disclosed abuse to the Church 33 years after the first alleged incident.⁹

I encourage victims to make their experiences public with the help of victims' organisations despite having to fight the full weight and might of an unrepentant cult that will stop at nothing to discredit and silence them.

All of these obstacles to the reporting and judicial prosecution of suspected abuse contribute directly to abusers being protected from criminal justice. Abusers continue to rape and abuse children with impunity, which does not seem to trouble the Roman Catholic Church, despite its claim to be France's moral authority. Apologies and events of recognition may ease the pain for some, but they risk detracting attention from punishing abusers and paying proper compensation.

The Roman Catholic Church appears to see no act of commission or omission as too heinous as long as it protects the Church's reputation and finances.

The suffering of abuse victims is compounded by gaslighting tactics. The Church hierarchy ignores victims or feigns disbelief about their disclosures. The Church and its lay accomplices brand these whistle-blowers as liars or fantasists whilst it protects the numerous child rapists and abusers in its ranks.

The film *By the Grace of God* about Cardinal Barbarin and Preynat victims depicts this painfully.

Here are some more points on the CIASE inquiry.

I start with two positive points.

The sociologists' and a statistician's estimate of 330,000 victims since 1950 emphasised the gravity of the problem. In my dialogue with CIASE's President Jean-Marc Sauvé, I had strongly criticised his earlier estimates of the number of victims — which he had increased in tiny steps to "10,000+".

Despite one of the Pope's advisors having endorsed the 330,000 calculation¹⁰, J-MS's fellow members of the Institut Catholique de Paris, ridiculed the figure in the media, and successfully lobbied the Pope to ignore CIASE's findings.

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https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/final_report_-_volume_4_identifying_and_disclosing_child_sexual_abuse.pdf page 33

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https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/final_report_-_volume_4_identifying_and_disclosing_child_sexual_abuse.pdf page 34

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<https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/15352/vatican-postpones-meeting-between-pope-and-head-of-french-abuse-commission>

Sauvé later called off the scheduled Papal audience, recognising, revealingly, that it “would embarrass both the CIASE and the Catholic Church”.¹¹ I am sure that the Pope was relieved.

CIASE’s next best point – also successfully torpedoed – was to propose that, in the case of abuse of minors, disclosures in the confessional should not be exempt from the French law on denunciation.

However the Church’s spokesperson on abuse, Archbishop Moulins-Beaufort, countermanded that. When challenged on this by the Elysée Palace- to remind him that the Republic’s laws are not trumped by canon law, Archbishop Moulins-Beaufort claimed to have spoken “clumsily”, which was a long way short of a retraction.

Worse, is that the Vatican’s Apostolic Penitentiary has since “ruled” that temporal laws cannot overrule confessional secrecy.¹² In other words, the rules of sect or cult trump national laws.

A more respectable example has been set throughout Australia where exemption for the confessional has been specifically ruled out of disclosure requirements of Child Sex Abuse laws¹³, and the same just been recommended by the Inquiry in England & Wales¹⁴. Shouldn’t the Republic follow suit and punish law breakers?

Levels of recompense calculated by bodies ostensibly independent of the Church have recently been released.

They are insulting: €8,000 to €60,000 for most victims, with a third receiving less than €8,000.¹⁵

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<https://www.nouvelobs.com/societe/20221008.OBS64284/jean-marc-sauve-un-an-apres-la-ciase-dans-la-rue-on-me-remercie-pour-ce-que-la-commission-a-fait.html>

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<https://newdailycompass.com/en/confessional-secrecy-the-vatican-speaks-up>

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<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-09-08/queensland-law-jail-priests-not-reporting-child-sex-confessions/12642144> (example of one state)

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<https://lawandreligionuk.com/2022/10/20/iicsa-sacramental-confession-and-mandatory-reporting-of-child-sexual-abuse/> (the law “should not be subject to exceptions based on relationships of confidentiality, religious or otherwise”)

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https://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article/2022/04/14/french-commission-releases-new-compensation-process-for-sexual-abuse-victims-in-the-catholic-church_5980594_7.html

We went into great detail in our proposals to CIASE about how compensation should be calculated to reflect much more realistically the loss to victims, many of whose lives have been profoundly damaged.

We should be demanding a minimum of €100,000 to €500,000 where there has been actual harm. And let us not forget the Church, so disingenuously pleading poverty, is an extraordinarily wealthy institution.

In many cases, the abuse suffered as children has led to poor employment, and often none. As well as the amounts, the number of payments made to date, just sixty, is unacceptable. Many of the victims are old and in desperate need.

Even La Croix suspects that CIASE was “careful not to challenge Catholic dogma head-on” because it would risk the CIASE report being rejected *in toto*. I am convinced that CIASE made massive compromises when it produced its report. In other words, it was far from an independent report.

Sadly, CIASE ignored our compensation proposals, and argued against extending prescription (statutes of limitation) time limits, both of which add to the uncomfortable questions about whose side CIASE is on.

There is another question you should put to CIASE: whose interests do you represent: Justice or the Roman Catholic Church?

CIASE’s worst omission of all was not to demand that full disclosure of suspected abuse, past and present, be made to civil authorities as the law requires, together with the severe punishment of those at all levels for failing to do so.

Perhaps you could investigate why CIASE and, the French Republic failed to make these demands?

The answer, however, might be seen in the recent, chilling case study demonstrating that the rule of omertá remains absolute in the Church even now. This means that it is not only minors who are at risk but adults who are vulnerable too.

A very young seminarian called Mahé Thouvenel was groped several times, once in Mass, by Archbishop Nuncio Ventura. Deeply upset, Mahé reported the abuse. In 2020 Ventura was convicted by a Paris court of groping Mahé and several other men, receiving a 10-month suspended prison sentence.¹⁶

Ventura was then required to pay €23,000 in damages and legal costs. Despite the chronic shortage of seminarians, Mahé was dismissed. His defence attorney noted “In this kind of business, it is very difficult to attack the Church.”

Neither Archbishop Moulins-Beaufort nor any cleric came to Mahé's aid. M. Sauvé also ignored this example, which we offered quite forcefully about bullying and omertá. What worse signal could this send to clerical rapists and abusers and their accomplices?

Ventura's case is known to the Prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, but Ventura remains an Archbishop. The message is clear: punish the victim and protect the perpetrator.

Eradicating Child Sexual Abuse is certainly not a priority for the Pope. Early in his papacy, child experts at the UN issued a report with numerous constructive recommendations connected with Child Sex Abuse¹⁷.

One was that the Church "Immediately remove all known and suspected child sexual abusers from assignment and refer the matter to the relevant law enforcement authorities for investigation and prosecution purposes".

The Vatican rejected the report *in toto*¹⁸ and has ignored the recommendations.

The Vatican's mandatory last five-yearly report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2014 was fourteen years overdue. The report due on 1 September 2017 is now five years overdue, despite reminders.

We reluctantly agree with the conclusions on the Church and CIASE in an article by Bernadette Sauvaget, a practising Catholic, in *La Liberation*¹⁹.

Madame Sauvaget wrote: "the institution is no longer capable of reforming itself. In the parishes, those who remain do not want the Catholic Church to reform".

She wondered whether the report has really had any concrete consequences, and whether it ever will have any.

The only sense of reality and ownership from the Church came from the (first female) President of the Conférence des Religieux et Religieuses de France, Véronique Margron. She recounted having the impression of finding herself, in many dioceses, faced with "criminal organisations".²⁰

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<https://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/concluding-observations-holy-see-crc-annotated-by-nss.pdf>

18

https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/secretariat_state/2014/documents/rc-seg-st-20140205_concluding-observations-rights-child_en.html

19

https://www.liberation.fr/societe/religions/abus-sexuels-dans-leglise-un-an-apres-le-rapport-de-la-ciase-les-fideles-veulent-ils-que-ca-bouge-20221005_VJUJT4XK2RDPDBGYDDJQ6BKW64/

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<https://www.nouvelobs.com/societe/20210221.OBS40468/abus-sexuels-dans-l-eglise-l-indemnisation-des->

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Unfortunately, there is only time today to outline briefly the crisis and what it means for the French concept of laïcité. Serious concerns persist about the French Republic's commitment to eradicate clerical child sex abuse.

In summary, where child abuse is concerned, the Church appears to be above the law, a complaint that recalls the French people's unhappiness with the aristocracy and the monarchy in 1789.

Neither parliamentary house has taken this crisis seriously.

The almost complete failure to prosecute approximately a million cases of abuse is an indictment of the Police and of the nation's Prosecutors.

There is a question for you to put to the Ministers of the Interior and of Justice: why aren't the French Republic's Police and the Prosecutors arresting and prosecuting suspected clerical child rapists and abusers?

It is inexplicable that it needed a private prosecution to secure a conviction of Cardinal Barbarin, even though he admitted not disclosing abuse by Preynat.

We remain astounded that the Cour de Cassation found grounds to reverse Barbarin's earlier conviction. It justified this in part by ruling that when the victim reached adulthood, the sole obligation to report lay with them, and no longer with anyone else with knowledge of the abuse, even though the 60% of victims that do disclose typically take three decades to do so.

Another indicator of state denial, so prejudicial and injurious to adult and child victims of clerical sexual crimes, is the refusal of the French Republic to disclose clerical abuse to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, even when the Committee specifically requested it.²¹

victimes-toujours-dans-les-limbes.html

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<https://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2fPPRiCAqhKb7yhsunLt%2fwNn9IUMCa5I2sTMkwj68WCpIGZEmVJoXEibT3NFiWjzALk%2feL2QSfISY40meNe3OJ8J4eBnMbp6svxlVfnzv1VtCDbR3zplE%2fin7> (English)
<https://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2fPPRiCAqhKb7yhsunLt%2fwNn9IUMCa5I2sTMkwj68WCpIGZEmVJoXEibT3NFiWjzALk%2feL2QSfISY40k3cLbP3KTDnvOzFI%2fGAeeewwFn4X8w6nuFQrXN0o%2b%2fM> (français)

“Sexual exploitation and abuse

21. Please provide information on:

(a) The investigation and prosecution of cases of sexual abuse by clergy members, and punishment imposed on perpetrators; information on the statute of limitations in such cases; redress, including compensation and rehabilitation; and the steps taken to protect children from sexual abuse by clergy members;

Under the Convention²², “difficulties ... affecting the degree of fulfilment of the obligations under the ... Convention also need to be reported”. Yet France also failed to refer to the 330,000 child victims of abuse in Catholic settings since 1950, as cited by CIASE.

How high would the number have needed to reach before it would have been regarded as a difficulty? We ask why the lay state, known since 1789 as the French Republic, so often elevates papal officials and senior clerics to the Legion d'Honneur despite the growing child sexual abuse scandal.²³

The derisive levels of compensation are in my opinion a breach of France's obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Republic needs to be asked how it will correct this.

A major priority is to abolish the time limit on prosecutions of all crimes of sexual aggression of minors, and of failure to denounce them.

In conclusion, the scale of the problem we face is immense. Regardless of the CIASE or parishioners, the Church will resist any reform, even to conform to criminal law, and the French Republic appears to condone this flagrant refusal to respect national law — and human rights.

Members of the Press, the fate of victims past, present and future is to a great extent in your hands.

I urge you to persuade your editors and publishers of the importance of this issue and to highlight every case of abuse and where the Church or the State are covering up or not fulfilling their function.

Look again at Mediapart's exposé, and the haunting case of priest Roger Mattasoli, the ruined family of three generations and the role played in this by the Bishops of Beauvais.²⁴

Encourage police and prosecutors to act courageously.

Support politicians seeking to find solutions.

We are going to ask them to call for a truly independent inquiry and one with a much wider remit than CIASE's, to improve the law — particularly on prescription/statutes of limitation on mandatory

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<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child> Article 44(2):
“Reports made under the present article shall indicate factors and difficulties, if any, affecting the degree of fulfilment of the obligations under the present Convention. Reports shall also contain sufficient information to provide the Committee with a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of the Convention in the country concerned.”

23

<https://www.la-croix.com/Religion/Legion-dhonneur-sont-personnalites-religieuses-decorees-2022-07-14-1201224891>
<https://www.adiac-congo.com/content/legion-dhonneur-francaise-au-pere-federico-lombardi-61482>

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<https://www.la-croix.com/Religion/Catholicisme/Pedophilie-derriere-lassassinat-dun-pretre-IOise-serie-dysfonctionnements-2019-12-12-1201066098> Jacques Benoit-Gonnin (Beauvais) in 2010

reporting²⁵, and examine the conduct of all aspects of justice as well as – very thoroughly – the conduct of the Church.

We will also be liaising with the UN over abuse in France and the Republic’s refusal to even mention it. The UN report is due in 2023.

This cannot be dismissed as a historical issue. As the Mahé reminds us and La Croix reports on CIASE: “abuses are on the rise again, at least apparently, and remain at a significant level”.²⁶

Any coverage you can offer to help in this battle for the common good is vital.

| We count on you.

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For example <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/document/professor-ben-mathews-model-law-mandatory-reporting-child-sexual-abuse-england-and-wales>

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<https://www.la-croix.com/Religion/Abus-sexuels-LEglise-faut-retenir-rapport-Sauve-2021-10-05-1201178972>