

# WORLD & NATION

## Priests abused religious, says Vatican spokesman

By John Norton  
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — The Vatican acknowledged the problem of sexual abuse of nuns by priests in some missionary territories and said it was working with bishops and religious orders to correct it.

Following the March 20 statement, missionary officials and senior members of religious orders said the dimensions and geographical extent of the sexual abuse were largely unknown and complicated by sometimes overlapping issues of cultural practice and failure to live celibacy vows.

They also said instances of sexual abuse and misconduct did not paint a complete picture of the church in Africa and elsewhere. But the acknowledgment drew attention to concerns that the African church has grown without adequate formation or commitment.

Joaquin Navarro-Valls, papal spokesman, said that "some negative situations" should not obscure the "often-heroic faithfulness of the great majority of men and women religious and priests." He said the problem "is restricted to a limited geographical area," which he did not identify, and said the Vatican was addressing it through the "dual approach of formation of persons and of solving individual cases."

His statement came in apparent response to a mid-March article in the *National Catholic Reporter*, a U.S. weekly, which asserted that sexual abuse of religious women by priests, including rape, was a serious problem, especially in Africa.

The article cited five internal church re-

ports, several of which were presented at the Vatican, written between 1994 and 1998 by senior members of women's religious orders and a U.S. priest.

The article said some Catholic clergy have exploited their financial and spiritual authority to gain sexual favors from nuns, a situation facilitated by cultural subservience of women in some regions.

In Africa, where HIV and AIDS are rampant, young nuns are sometimes seen as safe targets of sexual activity by priests and other males, it said.

In extreme cases, priests have impregnated nuns and then encouraged them to have abortions, the article said. In one instance, a priest celebrated the funeral Mass for a nun he had taken for an abortion and who died during the procedure.

The reports cited did not name alleged abusers or victims and only once named a country-specific incident: a bishop in Malawi who dismissed the leaders of a diocesan women's congregation in 1988 after they complained that 29 sisters had been impregnated by diocesan priests.

In a joint statement March 21, the two main associations of men and women religious — respectively, the Union of Superiors General and the International Union of Superiors General — underscored their awareness of the problem and said they were taking concrete steps to address it.

Sister Rita Burley, superior general of the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and International Union of Superiors General president, said the steps included tougher standards for admission into religious life, a focus on human development in formation, and resolution of specific



Edgar Romero/CNS

## Romero remembered

Enilda Amaya joins a procession marking the 21st anniversary of the death of Archbishop Oscar Romero March 24 in San Salvador. Amaya holds a portrait of the slain archbishop and of her son, a seminarian who was also slain during El Salvador's civil war.

cases of abuse.

In a Vatican Radio interview March 21, Sister Burley said her union had been examining the question for at least three years. The unions' statement said the great majority of the church's 1 million nuns and 200,000 religious men faithfully and courageously witness the Christian message, a reality "which often in today's world 'never makes news.'"

MISNA, a Rome-based missionary news service, said that while the instances of sexual abuse "can and must not be denied or justified," they represent "a marginal phenomenon" in comparison to the "arduous and courageous work" of many missionaries, often in situations of great hardship.

The two main associations of U.S. religious — the Conference of Major Superiors of Men and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious — said they were "deeply disturbed" by the reports of sexual abuse by priests.

"In any culture or situation, those in power have an ethical responsibility not to exploit others for personal gains," they said in a March 22 statement.

While most people interviewed said the issue of sexual abuse of nuns was widely recognized in church circles, some representatives of religious women active in Africa said they had never heard of it, including a senior member of the Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary, and Sister Adele Brambilla, head of the Comboni Missionary Sisters.

Father Bernardo Cervellera, director of Fides, the Vatican's missionary news service, said the problem was limited to sub-Saharan Africa and was related to negative cultural views there of women and the value of celibacy.

These are not cases of "psychopathic"

violence against women, but instead a "cultural way of living" that is common throughout the region, he said.

A missionary priest in Tanzania told Catholic News Service that violations of celibacy vows, including consensual sex between priests and nuns, was so widespread that it stunted Vatican efforts in the mid-1990s to promote local candidates for bishops' nominations.

Part of the problem in Africa is the relatively high number of young unsupervised priests, who in the past would have had older Western missionaries as "mentors," a senior official of a missionary congregation said.

An African priest, Oblate Father Alexander Montanyane, in the southern African country of Lesotho, said another difficulty was a slippage in sexual values caused by the gradual disintegration of traditional African societies.

"The society's values are changing so much, and the new vocations are coming out of that society," he said.

One African priest in Rome criticized the publication of the reports and said they seemed to take for granted that celibacy was unworkable in African cultures. In addition, while individual cases might be true, the reports' failure to cite specific names or locations undermines their credibility and harms the reputation of the African church in general, said Father John Egbulefu, a theology professor at Urbanian University.

Father Henk C.J. Bonke, procurator general of the Missionaries of Africa, said sexual abuse of nuns by priests was not limited to Africa and even extended to the United States. He said several religious congregations had developed policies to guide investigations of alleged abuse.

## Exhumation shows intact face of Pope John XXIII

By John Thavis  
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Church officials who opened the casket of Pope John XXIII found his face well preserved nearly 38 years after his death, but the Vatican downplayed talk of a miracle.

The discovery was made in mid-January, when Vatican officials and technicians exhumed Pope John's body in a "recognition" ceremony, in anticipation of its transferal from the grotto to the main level of St. Peter's Basilica. Workmen had to open a marble casing and then three successive caskets: one of oak, one of lead and one of cypress, in which the body was closed.

"Once freed from the cloth that covered it, the face of the blessed (Pope John) appeared intact, with the eyes closed and the mouth slightly open, and bearing the features that immediately called to mind the familiar appearance of the venerated pontiff," the report said.

After it was officially recognized, the body was sprayed with an anti-bacterial

agent and the casket was resealed hermetically. The body had not been embalmed, although it was treated with chemicals so that it could be displayed before burial.

Father Ciro Benedettini, a Vatican spokesman, cautioned against reading too much into the finding.

"Objectively, the body was discovered to be preserved. But this does not necessarily mean that a supernatural event was involved," he said.

A Vatican technician present at the exhumation said that in his view there was "nothing miraculous" about the preservation of Pope John's body. "When he died, some measures were taken for the display of the body for the veneration of the faithful. It also should not be forgotten that the remains were kept in three caskets, one of which was sealed lead," Nazareno Gabrielli, a technician at the Vatican Museums, told the newspaper *Corriere della Sera*.

Other experts said that while this type of preservation was unusual, it could be explained by the fact that little or no oxygen could have reached the remains.

## Prosecutors try to pin bishop's murder on priest, soldiers, guard

GUATEMALA CITY (CNS) — A former head of Guatemala's military intelligence ordered the 1998 murder of Auxiliary Bishop Juan Gerardi Conedera of Guatemala City, prosecutors said.

Meanwhile, defense lawyers for a diocesan priest also charged with the killing declared his innocence and said he should be released.

In the indictment read to a packed courthouse March 23, the opening day of the trial of five people accused of murdering Bishop Gerardi, the attorney general's office accused retired Col. Disrael Lima Estrada of masterminding the killing out of fear that the late bishop would testify against him in the future.

The public prosecutor charged that Lima, 58, was terrified of the legal implica-

tions of a damning report, "Guatemala: Never Again," which detailed human rights abuses committed by the army during the nation's 36-year civil war. Bishop Gerardi published the report just two days before his death.

Lima, the highest-ranking of the three officers charged with the murder, sat silently as a court officer read from the indictment. Beside him sat his son, Capt. Byron Lima Oliva, and a former presidential guard, Sgt. Jose Obdulio Villanueva. The three military officers have been charged with "extrajudicial murder."

The younger Lima told reporters March 23: "I am not guilty of this crime and my lawyers will show everyone here that."

Lawyers for Father Mario Orantes, a diocesan priest who shared the parish

house with the late bishop, moved that charges against their client be dismissed. Father Orantes, who appeared in court in a wheelchair, is accused of assisting the murderers. The priest has been confined to a city hospital where he has been recovering from a chronic ailment.

Attorneys for Bishop Gerardi's former housekeeper, Margarita Lopez, also moved for the elderly woman to be cleared. She has been charged as an accessory and has been under house arrest.

In an interview with Catholic News Service in late March, public prosecutor Leopoldo Zeissig said his office had "strong evidence" to implicate all five defendants.

According to the indictment, much of the case depends on the testimony of a

homeless man, Ruben Chanex, who used to sleep in the park across the street from the late bishop's house at St. Sebastian Parish, close to the central square in the capital. The bishop was bludgeoned to death outside the house the night of April 26, 1998.

Chanex said he saw Villanueva and the younger Lima at the scene of the crime and witnessed Father Orantes kicking shut the door of the parish house shortly after the time of the bishop's murder, some two hours before the priest reported the killing to the police.

Another key witness, a taxi driver, was said to have seen the older Lima drinking at a bar to one side of the park the night Bishop Gerardi was slain, apparently watching over the crime scene.