

INTERVIEW / PAEDOPHILIA

Barbarin: false accusations against me are an attack on the Church

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Last April, amid general silence, the French Court of Cassation [the supreme court of appeal] rejected the appeal filed by eight civil parties against the Court of Appeal's ruling that in January 2020 had acquitted Cardinal Philippe Barbarin of the charge of

concealing the sexual abuse of minors committed by former priest Bernard Preynat between 1971 and 1991. The former archbishop, who only arrived in Lyon in 2002, has emerged with his head held high from a legal case that has tested him to the limit and that has been the source of an unprecedented media campaign in France. After resigning from the leadership of the archdiocese, Barbarin now works as a simple chaplain in a mother house of nuns in Saint-Pern. He recounted his suffering as a man unjustly accused and his closeness to the suffering of the victims of Preynat in a book, "*En mon âme et conscience*", published two years ago in France.

Then he resumed his silence, committed only to his priestly mission among the nuns of Saint-Pern, with the elderly, the poor, and seminarians. Last week in Italy we heard about him and the Preynat affair again after a national newspaper published the letter sent to him by the then secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the current Cardinal Prefect Luis Ladaria Ferrer. The French courts, however, have definitively recognised in two sentences that Barbarin did not try in any way to cover up the crimes of the paedophile priest. The cardinal agreed to talk to the *Daily Compass* to recount his media-judicial ordeal.

How much did your active participation in the *Manif pour tous* season influence the media lynching of which you were a victim? Did they make you pay for that victory?

Much has been said, but who can prove it? Some 'supportive' articles have made the connection. First of all, I would like to make it clear that I am a friend of many homosexual people; many of them would agree to testify. Like all His disciples, the Lord asks me to love and serve all those He puts in my path, without judging anyone. But if the first book of the Bible tells us that "a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall be one flesh", I do not see why a Parliament suddenly has the right to change the meaning of the word 'marriage'. I had said, as had others, that if we touched this bastion of marriage, the whole of society would be shocked. Some laughed at this statement which was considered 'alarmist' at the time. Less than ten years later, we observe that court decisions normalise 'multi-parenting' situations and that surrogacy is at our doorstep. Furthermore, I bear in mind that we are in a democracy and that, in this context, we have the right to express our agreement or disagreement on a bill, and even on a law in force. Sometimes it happens that MPs themselves want to amend a law, however recent. This is the current case, in the National Assembly, of the law on euthanasia which was unanimously approved by the French Parliament just fifteen years ago and which many MPs now want to change.

Did you ever have the impression that the Church was in the dock rather than

Barbarin?

From the beginning, the Church has been in the dock. When there was the great fire of Rome in 64, the Christians had just arrived there and Nero decided it was their fault: they had to pay. But not all accusations are injustices and lies. This is demonstrated, unfortunately, by the work done in recent times on paedophile crimes perpetrated by priests and lay people, in the Church and in the rest of society. My time in the dock is only an epiphenomenon that does not change the whole path taken by the Church in her process of purification and reform. The heart of this journey is still in the making. The main thing is yet to come. This is what we say in the Creed: after so many "creeds", we end with a wonderful "appearance". Yes, "the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come" is all our hope!

In the book you say that in the street or at the station you were called a "paedophile". How did you manage to put up with all that? Does it still happen today despite your acquittal?

In February 2016, at the beginning of this media storm, the last Beatitude settled in my prayer: "Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and, lying, say all kinds of evil against you for My sake. Rejoice and be glad" (Mt 5:11-12). There is also what Saint Paul writes: "Rejoice always, pray unceasingly, in everything give thanks" (1 Thess 5, 17-18)...

Of course, it has not always been easy! Basically, I think it was thanks to the prayers of so many friends that I was able to get back on my feet and pursue the fulfilment of my task. It must also be said that many times I was stopped in the street, in Lyon as in Paris, by people who recognised me and said: "We pray for you every day.... Count on us!" Today things have calmed down, but many people remember my conviction at first instance more than the acquittal I eventually received. Even if the Cassation confirmed the decision of the Court of Appeal, which the media barely mentioned, my name will remain linked to the priest paedophilia scandal, which is, indeed, infamous! People are confused and believe that I covered up paedophile acts during my episcopate... Few people know that these acts were committed twenty years before my arrival and were managed by those who led the diocese three terms before me!

Is it true, as you write in your book, that the mood towards the Church in French society changed after the arson of Notre-Dame Cathedral? From the insults that you experienced at first hand because of the paedophilia scandal, the mood changed to words of compassion.

Several priests, especially from Paris, have told me that they were publicly insulted and laughed at in the streets during these paedophile cases, and long afterwards. But the

tone changed after the shock of the Notre-Dame fire. So, on the contrary, those who recognised a priest in the street often stopped to express their compassion, the inner wound that this shocking event represented for them: the flames, the fall of the spire, the threat to the North Tower, the enormous risks taken by the firemen! The whole world trembled and vibrated before this spectacle, and no one has forgotten that evening of Monday of Holy week 2019. And I thought it manifested the astonishing truth of Mary's phrase that we sing in the evening at Vespers, in the Magnificat: "All generations will proclaim me blessed"! This struck a chord with the French people, who suddenly remembered their Christian roots and their hope.

He decided to donate the proceeds of his book to the victims of paedophile priests and confessed that they are the first people he prays for every day. Did you get to know any of Preynat's victims personally?

For a long time, whenever I had to sign a contract with a publisher, the royalties went directly to the diocese of Lyon. So when the request came from the victims' associations for my book "En mon âme et conscience", it wasn't me who had to decide. And the diocese of Lyon, for which I was no longer responsible, decided that this money would go to the victims; it seemed to me a good response. As for the morning prayer, yes, on the back of a card representing Christ on the cross, I wrote the names of the victims who took me to court and of many others who came forward or whom I then took in. Over the years, we have come to understand better that these criminal acts cause an incomparable wound, which some say cannot heal. I rejoice that the Church in many countries is embarking on a path of reparation; it is justice. We, in any case, must pray to the Lord to heal all that can and all that must be healed in each of the victims.

A few months ago, in Assisi, Pope Francis publicly thanked you for having "endured with dignity the experience of abandonment and mistrust". You were visibly moved. Have you ever felt abandoned by the Church?

The period I went through brought clarity to many relationships: some friendships solidified, others disappeared. This kind of test acts as a revelation. But the Church is my Mother and my family, and I never thought she had abandoned me. Several bishops came especially to Lyon to show their fraternal support. As for Pope Francis, from whom I received my mission, I am very grateful to him for his continued confidence, despite the horrors that were said about me. That meeting in Assisi, organised by the charitable association 'Fratello', was attended by 500-600 poor people from across Europe and we were also in contact with more than 20,000 others, to whom the Pope addressed a special message. We had made this request a long time ago. A meeting of Francis, in the city of St Francis, with the poor from so many countries, was indeed a beautiful

testimony! And it had to be very close to the "World Day of the Poor" (WPD). The pope asks that every bishop be in his diocese on this day, to welcome the poor, pray and share a meal with them. So, since he wanted to be in Rome on Sunday, he agreed to be with them on Friday morning in Assisi. He had planned to publicly thank Etienne Villemain, because he was the organiser of the WPD, announced by Francis at the end of the "Year of Mercy". Then he said a word about me because he had seen me before he entered the Basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli, but we guessed this was unexpected. Obviously, this moved me... and even embarrassed me; however, I still went to thank him at the end of the meeting.

At only 71 years of age you are a cardinal, yet today you work as a simple chaplain. How has your life changed compared to when you were archbishop of Lyon?

Today I am chaplain at the Mother House of the Little Sisters of the Poor, in Saint Pern, between Rennes and Saint-Malo. These sisters have a vocation to give themselves to the poorest of the elderly, and each of their facilities is called 'Ma Maison'. For me, the main thing was to find a true priestly ministry, one that was simple and that I knew how to carry out. I had time to think about it and I made a choice, because I received various proposals. I also teach courses at the Séminaire Saint-Yves, in Rennes, and am often asked to preach retreats to various groups of seminarians, nuns, lay people, and priests... Obviously it is a very different life and mission from the one I had in Lyon. But what I like is that it is truly a priestly service, with its joys and demands. I am welcomed into this diocese as a brother and I am very grateful to Bishop d'Ornellas who has made this possible. As St Ignatius says, we must love God, in health as well as in sickness, in wealth as well as in poverty; the important thing is to 'choose' His will every day. Yesterday I was Archbishop of Lyon, today I am a chaplain to nuns... a priest, a Christian who moves forward as he is asked, on the path of the Kingdom.