

EXCLUSIVE

## Paedophile priests cover up casts shadows over Prevost, cardinal who selects bishops

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Allegations of abuse against two priests and accusations against the bishop for covering them up. In itself, unfortunately, this is nothing new. But if the bishop in question, in the midst of the scandal, is called to Rome as prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops, the

matter becomes objectively very serious. And if then, as prefect of bishops, a friend of his is appointed bishop to head his old diocese, who starts to erase all traces of the scandal, the matter becomes more than suspicious.

**This is exactly the case of Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost, an Augustinian,** Bishop of Chiclayo (Peru) until Pope Francis appointed him, on 30 January 2023, to lead the Dicastery that presides over the appointment of all the world's bishops, an office he actually assumed on the following 12 April along with that of president of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America. The cardinal's biretta then arrived at the Consistory on 30 September 2023.

**But let us proceed with order:** according to the sworn testimonies of three victims, which the *Daily Compass* is in possession of, the events reported happened between 2006 and 2010 and two priests from the diocese of Chiclayo, about 600 kilometres north of the capital Lima, were responsible: Father Eleuterio Vàsquez-Gonzales, known as Father 'Lute', and Father Ricardo Yesquen. The victims who filed the complaint were three young women, children between 10 and 14 years old at the time of the abuse: three sisters, who decided to denounce the priests after discovering that they had all suffered similar abuse.

**The most enterprising of the three was Ana Maria Quispe Diaz,** who had already contacted Bishop Robert Prevost by telephone in early 2020 to report the behaviour of the two priests and especially of Father Lute, at the time of the events **parish priest of San José Obrero** (St Joseph the Worker), in the district of Victoria, and well known in the diocese. Father Vàsquez's modus operandi is similar with respect to all three: he arranges to be accompanied to some mission in distant parishes, where they have to stay overnight and, coincidentally, there is only one bed to share, and there hugs, groping and genital stroking begin.

**Restrictions due to the pandemic prevented a meeting in person** between the women and Prevost, which finally took place on 5 April 2022 in the episcopal see of Chiclayo, with all three sisters present. Prevost, who curiously enough was also the author of the Peruvian Episcopal Conference's Guidelines for Dealing with Cases of Sexual Abuse, directs the women to the listening centre he has just set up and - according to the testimonies of the alleged victims - invites them to lodge a complaint with the public authorities because 'there was no way for the Church to investigate and only civil investigations could be used by the Church to sanction' any perpetrators. This, as we know, is not true, canonical investigations are independent of civil ones. But the complaint to the local police nonetheless leads to nothing because the possible crime is

time-barred (the statute of limitations for these crimes, in Peru as in most of Latin America, is 4 years). In the meantime, however, June 2022, Father 'Lute' is transferred to his home parish of Santa Cruz, **officially for health reasons**. As for Father Yesquen, nothing could be done because he suffered from senile dementia and had already been in a nursing home for some time.

**In Prevost's defence, the diocese of Chiclayo**, in a **statement dated 10 September 2024**, following an **investigation by the Cuarto Poder programme** broadcast on 8 September on *América Television*, stating 'precautionary measures', launching 'Lute with 'disqualification from exercising immediately denied the following day statement (**here is the full text**) gave presence at various Eucharistic celebrations (**right**), even at the diocese's Chrism Mass prefect and was apostolic administrator



**The diocese also claims that all material concerning the diocesan investigation** was sent to Rome to the competent office of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, which would subsequently file the case. But the three young women claim that they were never summoned for testimony by any 'investigator' and that there is no trace of this investigation or of any examination by the Vatican Dicastery. The only time they were able to tell their story before an investigator officially appointed by the diocese was when Prevost's successor apostolic administrator, Bishop Guillermo Cornejo Monzón, opened (**'reopened' according to the diocese**) the investigation in December 2023 after Ana Maria Quispe Diaz, exasperated by the diocese's silence, **made her story public via social media**, also allegedly discovering at least seven other cases of young girls abused by the two priests.

According to the diocese, however, the papers concerning the case have again been submitted to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, where they are still awaiting examination.

**The affair therefore remains to be clarified**, including Bishop Prevost's responsibility in the alleged cover-up; but there are some indisputable facts and what has been happening since Prevost's appointment as Prefect is disturbing to say the least and is reminiscent of other unedifying events of this pontificate, from the case of Monsignor Gustavo Zanchetta (**here** and **here**) to that of **Father Marko Rupnik**.

**What is certain is that since the first report in 2020** there has been no move by

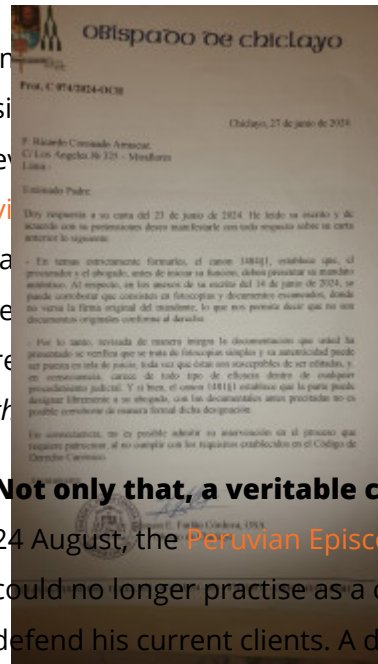
Prevost to clarify the substance of the allegations, and the restrictions due to the pandemic certainly do not justify inaction. And even after the formal complaint in April 2022 nothing concrete has really been done, as the diocese has still not been able to prove that a canonical investigation has been initiated and that the three alleged victims have been deposed.

**But above all, the timing of Prevost's appointment** as Prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops is astonishing: in January 2023, the case had not yet made the international press, but in the Peruvian Church the affair was already known and, according to what the *Daily Compass* has been able to ascertain, even the Pontiff had been warned of the risk. As if that was not enough, two embarrassing cases concerning Monsignor Prevost at the time when he was Superior General of the Augustinians (a mandate he held from 2001 to 2013) were already known, the cover-up of two Augustinian priests accused of sexual abuse: Father Richard J. McGrath (a case that became public in 2018 and for which **the Augustinian order paid \$2 million in compensation** to the victim); and **Father James Ray**, later reduced to the lay state in 2012, but whose connection with Prevost **was revealed in the press in early 2021**.

**It should be noted that in both of these cases**, Prevost was also joined by the current Archbishop of Chicago, Cardinal Blaise Cupich, who is notoriously close to Pope Francis.

**Given the context, Prevost's appointment therefore** appears at least risky if not downright inappropriate in such a delicate position as the choice of the world's bishops. But the worst comes later: shortly after the apostolic administrator Monsignor Cornejo Monzón opens the investigation into the case (December 2023), the appointment of the new bishop of Chiclayo arrives. On 14 February 2024, the pope appointed Monsignor Edinson Farfán Córdova, who had been bishop of the prelature of Chuquibambilla for just four years. So what is the problem? Simply that Farfán is an Augustinian like Prevost, a personal friend of his, and Prevost himself participated in Farfán's episcopal consecration. Not only that, in Chuquibambilla Monsignor Farfán was accused of covering up the abuse of another Augustinian priest, Don Juan Carlos Olaya.

**In practice, Cardinal Prevost had one of his friends** and confreres appointed to be his successor, who in fact



ing up' the Prefect's past. Not only did he put up a wall of silence but he also tried to investigate the allegations against Father Lute, but he has obstructed in every way the work of the canonist Ricardo Coronado Arrascaue, who since 6 May 2024 has taken on the role of the canonist. He has also been accused by women accusing Father Lute and Cardinal Prevost: first by denying the legitimacy of his appointment (*photo on the left*) and then by denying access to the documents relating to the investigation.

**Not only that, a veritable concentric attack was launched against Coronado:** on 24 August, the **Peruvian Episcopal Conference announced** that Monsignor Coronado could no longer practise as a canonist in Peru and therefore could not continue to defend his current clients. A decision that curiously anticipated **the letter of 29 August in which the bishop of Cajamarca** (the canonist's diocese of origin) informed him that a file had been filed against him with the Dicastery of the Clergy at the Vatican for an alleged unspecified crime 'contra sextum' (but the *Daily Compass* sources speak of a stable relationship with a consenting adult); and that the same Dicastery offers him the possibility of making a voluntary request to the Pope to ask for dispensation from the priesthood under penalty of 'the start of an administrative process'. The **commiqué of the Permanent Council of the Bishops of Peru** (September 16, 2024) (*photo on the right*) justifies precisely with this decision to prohibit Coronado from working in the diocese of Chiclayo on 24 August. If we think of the slowness and reticence of the Peruvian hierarchy in dealing with sexual abuse scandals, the speed and severity of the decision to prohibit Coronado (who, moreover, denies all the accusation of sexual abuse) is a little suspicious, given also that it is not a question of a crime but of a relationship between consenting adults.

**In short, there is enough** to demand that full light be shed on the affair and whether Cardinal Prevost should be kept in his post in the meantime.

