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Philippe's pseudomysticism and the abuses: the Saint-Jean case

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This article concludes the account of the story that is upsetting Catholic France. [Here](#) and [here](#) the first two episodes.

The Communauté Saint-Jean, or Famille Saint-Jean, founded in 1975 in Freiburg by Fr Marie-Dominique Philippe, now comprises three religious families, one male and two female, and oblates. To these must be added the Congregation of the Sœurs mariales d'Israël et de Saint-Jean, founded by Fr Marie-Dominique's former secretary, Tunde Szentes de Madefalna de Kisbaczon; annexed to the Communauté in 1995, it was 'mysteriously' suppressed by Cardinal Philippe Barbarin ten years later.

Starting in the year 2000, Goliath Magazine had begun publishing articles reporting on abuses and manipulations within the Community, up to a fully-fledged investigation of more than forty pages, published in No. 105/2005 (downloadable from [here](#)). In May 2015, AVREF, an association to help victims of religious movements, also published *Le livre noir de la Fraternité Saint Jean* (updated in 2021 and available [here](#)), in which, in addition to testimonies of sexual abuse and conscience, a disturbing synopsis of extremely serious events that took place in the Communauté was reported: from some tragic suicides (twenty cases reported) to sexual abuse recognised as such by the courts.

During the General Chapter of 2013, the then Prior General, Fr Thomas Joachim, addressed the toughest part, which has only recently emerged, and sent a letter to all the friends of the Community, in which he admitted "converging and credible testimonies that report that Fr Philippe sometimes made gestures contrary to chastity, without sexual union, towards adult women whom he stewarded". At least fifteen women were involved. Six years later, the Rapport (downloadable [here](#)) of the "SOS Abuse" commission revealed a veritable system of "mystical"-sexual abuse in the Community: eight cases of child abuse (including two under 15s), involving six brothers of the Community; 32 cases of adult abuse, mostly committed between 2001 and 2013, carried out by 27 brothers (including 25 priests, and 7 with training or stewardship positions within the Institute). About 20 sisters of the Community were victims; six cases involved homosexual acts with religious brothers.

The most significant fact concerns the context in which these acts occurred; in 80% of the cases, in fact, the abuses took place during spiritual stewardship. The Rapport specifies that these acts of a sexual nature were accompanied by a very precise justification, namely the reference to "l'amour d'amitié", which Father Marie Dominique had placed at the basis of the Communauté's spirituality. The expression amor amicitiae is taken from the Summa Theologiae of St Thomas Aquinas and indicates the love of benevolence, which seeks the good of the other. A love that therefore carries with it

dedication to the beloved and includes manifestations of affection. However, this principle has been completely distorted by Fr Marie-Dominique and many of his 'spiritual children'. Against the background of the false 'mysticism' of his brother, Fr Thomas ([here](#)), the manifestations of affection of the amor amicitiae also included acts involving the sexual sphere.

"Very often, the perpetrators, during their confrontation with the Commission", the Rapport continues, "said that they were guided by righteous intentions, such as that of transmitting tenderness to persons wounded in their affectivity, sometimes giving a self-styled spiritual, theological, or charismatic content to this approach. It also emerges that the people who committed these acts did not recognise them as "a sin against chastity", but rather as a lack of prudence.

Finally, the testimony of one of the victims should be noted, which clearly presents the completely deviated conception of the priest's role in spiritual accompaniment. She denounces "this erroneous conception of the saviour-priest, who with his spiritual direction occupies a capital place in the life of the person he directs, but who in fact replaces God who saves... He takes part in all the decisions and directions of the person's life and often also has an enormous role in their affectivity, using this person for his own sexual needs, explaining that this is the spiritual expression of the love of friendship that unites the spiritual father to the person he guides".

Sophie Ducray had decided to entrust her painful story to a book (Étouffée. Récit d'un abus spirituel et sexuel), published in September 2019 by the publisher Tallandier. A book that has allowed many other women to find the strength and courage to also tell their tragedy. In 1989, when she was only sixteen years old, for the first time Sophie met the Community to which she decided to consecrate herself once she had come of age. Her 'spiritual father', Benoît-Emmanuel Peltureau-Villeneuve (in the book still under a pseudonym), only last December discharged from the clerical state without the possibility of appeal or recourse, had begun to give her a lot of confidence, to listen to her at length, to make her believe that she was the favourite. He then moved on to more explicit acts. Sophie recounts how the priest justified these acts by showing her Fr Marie-Dominique's writings, how he framed these acts of a sexual nature as part of the 'spirit of virginity', as they did not go so far as to violate the person carnally. The woman, now married with children, expresses her belief that "everything was dictated by the founder", including the teaching that "at Mass all sins are forgiven... You can sin, but then you go to Mass and your sins are forgiven".

The Rapport also notes Fr Marie-Dominique's serious responsibilities, not only for acts of a sexual nature committed by him. In fact, it appears that the founder "approved of a trainer who kissed a brother on the mouth, on the grounds that the latter needed tenderness". No condemnation of these acts was reported by members of the Community, but a simple recommendation for discretion. Two brothers testified that they had themselves been the object of Fr Marie-Dominique's sexual 'attentions'. The Communauté Saint-Jean will have to pay a very high price for its part. The complaints will probably continue, while others will never come to light. For some, the wound is too deep, for others, it is impossible to face the harsh reality of a founder who was 'canonised', so to speak, too early and became the only indisputable reference point for religious and lay people close to the Community.

We started from the 1950s, from extremely serious accusations against Fr Thomas Philippe even then, and from the complicity and approval of his brother Marie-Dominique and his sister. After insufficient sanction, the incredible rehabilitation of both, which allowed the mystical-sexual delirium to spread, take root in secret, and spill over into Jean Vanier's L'Arche and the Communauté Saint-Jean. To the secrecy of the initiates of the "pseudomystical sect" were added the silence of those who knew, the lack of awareness of the seriousness of the situation, especially for the Gnostic mystical-theological framework; again, the inability of the institutions in charge to do justice, the desire to "save" the face of the Church, as if the Church needed saving, and precisely by

complicity with evil. Today we are faced with people destroyed psychologically and spiritually, with priests and religious in total identity crisis, for having been profoundly deceived by their founder, with the radical questioning of the credibility of the Catholic Church, of the virtue of celibacy, and of the priesthood itself. Seventy years of mistakes, for which we are paying dearly and which, looking at the Rupnik case, seem to have taught us nothing.