

SEXUAL ABUSE

Rupnik case, endless shame for the Vatican

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Call them provocations, if you like. Vatican News, the official Vatican portal that is part of the Dicastery for Communication, continues to publish images of the works of Father Marko Rupnik, the former Slovenian Jesuit accused of serious sexual abuse of at least twenty nuns, to accompany its articles. And the Archbishop of Bologna and President of the Italian Episcopal Conference, Cardinal Matteo Zuppi, **has given the go-ahead for the completion of a mosaic by Rupnik**

himself in the church of Santa Maria Regina Mundi, in Bologna.

Above all, the attitude of Vatican News and the Dicastery for Communication is sensational: the last time Rupnik's work was published was on 15 August to illustrate the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. And the reason had been explained by the Prefect of the Dicastery for Communication, Paolo Ruffini, at a press conference last 21 June in Atlanta: 'As Christians we are called not to judge', he had said; and since the canonical process is still ongoing, 'it would not be right to anticipate the decision'. And again: 'I do not believe that throwing stones is the way to heal' the wounds suffered by the victims. And then, with an air of defiance: 'Do you really think that by removing a picture of art from our site, I would be closer to the victims?' Statements that are a demonstration of arrogance and brazenness, only possible in the knowledge that one enjoys impunity and secure support from above.

Even more serious, the Dicastery for Communication continues with its provocations despite the fact that on 26 June, following Ruffini's statements and after meeting him in person, Cardinal Sean O'Malley, president of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, wrote a letter to all the heads of the Vatican Dicastery saying 'enough is enough' to the publication of Rupnik's works. O'Malley, whose insistence had prompted a recalcitrant Pope Francis to allow proceedings to be opened last October to establish Rupnik's responsibility, called for 'pastoral prudence to avoid the publication of artistic works that would imply an implicit defence' of abusers, or that would 'indicate indifference to the pain and suffering of so many victims of abuse'.

Continuing to publish Rupnik's work is therefore an open defiance of Cardinal O'Malley and all those in the Church who genuinely fight against the abuse of minors and vulnerable adults. It must be remembered that Father Rupnik, famous for his mosaics displayed in more than 200 churches around the world, is not simply suspected of abuse, but that dozens and dozens of circumstantiated allegations have already been made against him and judged 'credible' by the same Jesuit order to which he belonged and from which he was expelled in June 2023.

The scandal had erupted in December 2022 when news came out that an investigation initiated by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2021 had been dropped in October 2022. Worse still, there was the 'mystery' of an excommunication imposed on Father Rupnik by the same Congregation in 2020 for absolution of the accomplice and mysteriously annulled within a few days. Mystery, in a manner of speaking, because only the Pope had the power to revoke the excommunication.

And after all, Rupnik's friendship with Pope Francis is well known, as is his influence on the Pope, even in the choice of people introduced into the various Vatican offices. This is the case - as recalled in recent days by the Vaticanist Luis Badilla in his weekly newsletter Osservazioni casuali (Random observations) - of the Slovenian Nataša Govekar, who happens to occupy a prominent position precisely at the Dicastery for Communication. A laywoman, 49, she is a member of the Aletti Centre Team, which grew up right around Rupnik, and is still the centre of resistance covering up the misdeeds of the former Slovenian Jesuit. It should be remembered that it is precisely from here that the propaganda starts that intends to attribute the complaints against Rupnik to an unspecified internal feud between Jesuits. Propaganda that also feeds on intimidation and threats against those who take a critical stance against Father Rupnik (and we too have been subjected to this), but without ever documenting in any way the alleged exculpatory evidence.

The fact is that, despite being forced to endure the start of the canonical process by the evidence of the public complaints lodged against the artist, Rupnik's 'protectors' continue to sabotage any attempt to do justice and to promote the Slovenian priest's artistic work, being able to count on the benevolence - and even something more - of Pope Francis for this.

Significant in this regard is what happened in Lourdes, where for months a special commission discussed what to do with Rupnik's mosaics, prominently displayed on the facade of the Basilica of Our Lady of the Rosary. The bishop of Tarbes and Lourdes, Monsignor Jean-Marc Micas, has repeatedly said he was in favour of the total removal of the mosaics, but on 3 July last, **he announced the suspension of the final decision**, in order to avoid further divisions in the Church, and limited himself to leaving in the dark those mosaics that until then had been enhanced in the evening by special lighting. Well-informed people say that he was 'advised' to make this decision, and coincidentally he had **an audience with the Pope on 20 June**. It is also significant that in announcing the 'non-decision' he wanted to reiterate that it is right that those mosaics be removed.

The question of re-proposing certain works to the public is not a secondary one, because in Rupnik's case it is impossible to separate art from criminal conduct, because - according to the circumstantiated complaints and the testimonies read and heard in recent years - the abuses took place precisely during the production of his works. To exhibit, to publish his mosaics is not only an indirect offence to his victims but it is precisely to make them relive those abuses.

What the Vatican Dicastery for Communication is doing (and also the diocese of Bologna) is therefore shameful, it is itself a scandal, which embarrasses the whole Church, and demonstrates once again that in the fight against sexual abuse, despite the rhetoric of 'zero tolerance', many steps backwards have been taken compared to the pontificate of Benedict XVI.