

TURNING POINT

Rupnik, former nun comes out: 'He took my virginity'

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"The disciples' betrayal, the unworthy reception of His Body and Blood is certainly the Redeemer's greatest sorrow, the one that pierces His heart". Almost twenty years have passed since the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger made this unforgettable comment at

the ninth station of the Way of the Cross on Good Friday at the Colosseum. It seems incredible, but nineteen years after that cry of pain we are still dealing with a lack of transparency of the highest ecclesiastical authorities in a clamorous case of abuse.

The case involves Fr Marko Rupnik, a former Jesuit and famous Slovenian artist accused by several women of spiritual, psychological and sexual abuse. The facts date back to the late 1980s and early 1990s, but even in 2019 the architect absolved a woman, in confession, with whom he had had a sexual relationship, receiving a year later the shortest excommunication in history of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. It is still not known by whom or why the excommunication was withdrawn. Ever since the Rupnik 'bubble' burst in the Vatican, with the news of an initial investigation - overdue in 2021 - into his alleged wrongdoings in the Loyola Community in Ljubljana that lasted until 1993, a number of protagonists have decided to speak out, recounting their experiences anonymously to the newspapers.

Yesterday, however, marks an additional step: an alleged victim, Gloria Branciani, decided to forgo anonymity in order to demand truth and justice. These are the two most recurrent words in the long testimony given by the former nun in front of the journalists who flocked to the offices of the National Federation of the Italian Press in Rome. At her side was a former founding sister, Mirjam Kovac, who was even secretary to the foundress Ivanka Hosta and who praised the courage shown by Gloria at the time, when she decided to escape from the community after being isolated for her complaints.

Kovac's testimony is very important because by confessing to having realised within a few months that "Rupnik was exploiting his position to seek erotic-sexual approaches on at least twenty sisters out of a total in the community of forty" she seems to reinforce the idea that, to quote the Jesuits' note, the "degree of credibility of what has been denounced or testified to seems to be very high".

As of yesterday, therefore, we know that Gloria Branciani is the alleged victim of the ruthless story about the Slovenian ex-Jesuit, the one about the blasphemous request for threesomes made by referring to the Trinity. In a faint but determined voice, interrupting herself only three times out of emotion, the woman reconstructed the encounter that ruined her life. As a university medical student with a desire to become a missionary and a passion for art, Gloria explained that she met the Slovenian cleric when he was already known as a figure of great spirituality. The personality of the former Jesuit imposed itself in her life with compliments and attention at a time of low self-esteem. Then, the first episode that started the nightmare: "while he was painting in

the atelier, he stared at my body and lifted my skirt, saying that it was the gesture Our Lady made to reveal the divine humanity of Christ". The ex-nun's account continues: "After that time he told me that if I did not make that gesture again, it would be proof of a halt in my spiritual growth. I was very perplexed, disoriented, but he insisted that I could live that very special relationship because I had the gift of mysticism'.

The "unworthy reception of his Body" evoked by Ratzinger in the Way of the Cross in 2005 featured into Gloria's drama: "many times he would celebrate the Eucharist alone with me in the atelier and after the Eucharist or confession he would push me to hug him. Then from hugs, he slowly moved on to kisses, deeper and deeper. Once he told me that he kissed me like he kisses the altar where he celebrates the Eucharist. I was very naive at that time and really thought that that kind of physicality between us would end when my spiritual growth would allow it. But it did not. Rupnik alienated her from family and friends, going so far as to criticise her spiritual development in front of others if she was hesitant about his physical demands in private.

Gloria's account was very lucid, punctuated by important milestones in her relationship with her alleged abuser. One of these occurred one evening in June 1986, the evening before Rupnik's departure for Greece: "He asked me to celebrate the Eucharist in the atelier. I realised it was an excuse to force me to undress, so I decided to shift my attention to the conversation, but he was very impatient and when he accompanied me to the bus his anger exploded, saying I was worthless and that he wanted to break off all relations. He said this to me very aggressively, I felt that something was broken'. The next day, however, he changed his tone on the phone and sent her a greeting card from Greece. Strategies that seem to belong to what Gloria bluntly called 'manipulation'.

The woman claimed that the clergyman's control became such that he pushed her to leave her studies and home town and move to Slovenia, after pressure from Hosta and culminating in a call from the then archbishop of Ljubljana, Monsignor Alojzij Šuštar. This was recalled by the protagonist as the worst period because 'the physical abuse became more violent, especially in the car because he had to make rounds for spiritual engagements'. "Very serious abuse," the woman revealed, "due to which I also lost my virginity and was forced into other types of intimate relationships for which my contempt was evident. Rupnik, however, in the face of resistance, would be quick to justify his demands, claiming that the woman's opposition was due to the mistaken way she was living her sexuality. After taking her perpetual vows, Gloria had to reckon with the most blasphemous request: "he told me that in prayer he felt that our relationship

was not exclusive but should be in the image of the Trinity, so we should invite another sister to live like us". Once again, when confronted with Gloria's doubts, the then Jesuit would appeal to the psychological and spiritual aspect, telling her that she lacked determination and strength to take on sexual aggression. The first traumatic threesome, with a nun indicated by the spiritual father, allegedly took place in a friend's house in Gorizia. Confronted with the woman's first signs of faltering, Rupnik allegedly threatened to make her pass for crazy and justified himself by saying that he had obtained from his spiritual father 'theological confirmation of this sexuality'.

The situation did not change in Rome where Gloria returned, still subjugated - according to her account - by her confessor and guarantor for discernment before the Church. Accused of childish attitudes, the nun recounted that she had twice been taken by Rupnik to some porno cinemas in Rome, at the Salaria and Tuscolana: "you could see that he was a regular visitor", she said. Continuing her testimony about the period in Rome, "the requests for sexual acts even while he was painting were increasingly aggressive and often occurred when he was painting the face of Jesus for some of our chapels".

Exasperated, Gloria courageously decided to denounce Rupnik's alleged violence in 1993 to Superior Ivanka. From that moment on, she began to be observed closely within the community. The woman recounted: 'I try to talk to Rupnik but I can't, I try with his spiritual father but when I start to speak to him in confession about all that I had experienced, after two minutes he stops me and says that these are my things and that he doesn't want to know. Finally he hands me two sheets of paper and tells me to write a letter of resignation to the Loyola community'. A letter that it was Rupnik's spiritual father who signed because Gloria did not feel up to it. Yesterday, the woman revealed that she still keeps that document and had cited dangerously high blood pressure as the reason for leaving.

The escape from the community, praised after nineteen years by former sister Mirjam who was secretary to superior Hosta at the time, culminated in a night in the woods in which, Gloria explained in one of the few moments of emotion, she felt 'deeply that the Lord did not want me to die'. The former nun's testimony was not that of an anti-clerical: she herself said that the first person she had the courage to open up to about what happened to her was a Franciscan. In addition, she told the journalists present yesterday that her greatest suffering came from feeling 'violated in her intimacy, in her relationship with the divine, a humiliation for body, soul and spirit', adding, however, that she managed to get back on her feet again thanks to 'the love of God, the

true One, who transformed this burden into life'.

These faith-soaked words should make everyone feel even more dismayed by the attitude demonstrated by the church authorities involved, not only at the time of the events but also in recent years, since the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith began its investigation into the allegations against Rupnik. Gloria said she was not surprised by the mysterious lifting of the excommunication against Rupnik for the 2019 case. And when asked if she was disappointed with the Pope, she made no secret of the fact that she felt 'the handling from the beginning was not transparent'.

Before addressing the press in June 2022, the former nun - together with Kovac - had written a letter to the highest ecclesiastical authorities, including the Pope, but never received a response. At the beginning of the conference, showing a photo, BishopAccountability.org director Anne Barrett Doyle recalled that last September, however, Francis had received Maria Campatelli, Rupnik's great defender. Just as great bitterness emerged from Gloria Branciani's voice over the note from the Vicariate of Rome, which has rallied around the former Jesuit and his Aletti Centre.

Yesterday's press conference, in the presence of international TV channels and media, and with the applause that followed the lucid and not rancorous testimony of the alleged victim, showed how the Holy See's lack of transparency in the Rupnik case has very seriously damaged the Church. The affair of the former Slovenian Jesuit, now a diocesan in Koper, is unlikely to affect the historical judgment on the current pontificate regarding the handling of the abuse dossier.

In the meantime, Gloria, who may have been manipulated for years by exploiting her fragility, took her 'redress' on her alleged abuser yesterday, calmly admitting that she had forgiven him long ago. Now, however, it is up to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith to guarantee that search for truth and justice invoked yesterday.