

SCANDALS

Zanchetta and Rupnik: signs of change under new pontificate

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Something has changed in the Vatican. While Francis's pontificate, regrettably, will not be remembered for progress in the fight against sexual abuse, the cases of Marko Rupnik and Gustavo Oscar Zanchetta are key factors. Yet, it is precisely in the cases of

the former Slovenian Jesuit and the bishop emeritus of Orán that two significant developments occurred just one month after Leo XIV's election. It is hard not to link these developments to the new atmosphere at the Holy See, which began with the start of the Prevost era.

In recent days, Vatican News decided to finally remove images of Rupnik's artwork that continued to accompany articles and liturgical celebrations. Cardinal Seán O'Malley, president of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, requested the removal a year ago, taking on responsibility for the outrage expressed by the alleged victims of the priest-artist. In a letter to the heads of the dicasteries, he invited them to 'avoid conveying the message that the Holy See is unaware of the psychological distress that so many are suffering'. The Pontifical Commission announced the letter in a note published on the tutelaminorum.org website. However, unlike other minor initiatives of the commission, the Holy See Press Office, headed by Matteo Bruni, did not mention the note among the 'useful information' sent to journalists. *Vatican News* also ignored the news, presumably because it was the main recipient of the US cardinal's request and was embarrassed by this fact. In fact, O'Malley had taken action after protests over the *Vatican News* portal's stubborn refusal to stop publishing Rupnik's works, despite his expulsion from the Jesuits on allegations of abuse with 'a very high degree of credibility'. Moreover, the cardinal's letter was sent just a few days after the astonishing comments made by Paolo Ruffini, the prefect of the Dicastery for Communication. Ruffini claimed that those who believed removing Rupnik's images from *Vatican News* would help the victims were mistaken, and even stated that 'we are not talking about child abuse'. For almost a year, Vatican communications had not taken into consideration the explicit request of a cardinal.

However, a few days ago, just hours after Leo XIV granted an audience to the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, *Vatican News* hastily 'cleaned up' its websites of images of the works of the accused priest. This marks a clear U-turn from the stance taken by the head of the communications department at a conference in the US last year. It is hard not to attribute this turnaround to the election of Leo XIV and the persistence of O'Malley, who has also publicly reprimanded Francis on several occasions in recent years.

Another piece of news, this time from Argentina, also gives the feeling that a new phase is opening up in the handling of the most problematic abuse cases, thanks to Prevost. At the beginning of the month, Monsignor Gustavo Zanchetta, the 'spiritual son' of Jorge Mario Bergoglio who made him bishop of Orán, ended his stay in Rome. The

Salta Court of Appeal sentenced him to four years and six months in prison for continued sexual abuse of two seminarians, an offence made worse by the fact that it was committed by a religious official. However, Zanchetta spent only four months in prison before being granted the opportunity to serve his sentence at the Nuestra Señora del Valle monastery.

Then, in November, came another surprise: the convicted bishop was granted permission by the judges to travel to Rome for health reasons. Following a series of extensions, Zanchetta's stay lasted six months and remained shrouded in mystery. He was not seen in the Vatican, where he had become a familiar face during his time as an APSA councillor (which coincided almost exactly with the start of the Argentine investigation), and his admission to Gemelli Hospital also remained top secret. A little over a month after the death of his former confessor, Francesco, Zanchetta boarded a flight back to Argentina. According to local sources, the convicted bishop is in Salta, but not in the monastery, as his cell is being renovated. According to these sources, the prelate has requested a conditional suspension of his sentence.

Regardless of how he will serve the rest of his sentence in Argentina, his permit to stay in Rome expired after six months, just as the pontificate of Leo XIV began. This is probably a coincidence, but it is likely that Prevost is well informed about the Zanchetta case. One of the Pope's closest friends is Monsignor Alberto Germán Bochaty, auxiliary bishop of La Plata. In 2022, he signed the Argentine Bishops' Conference statement on Zanchetta's conviction. This statement condemned Zanchetta's "abusive behaviour" and expressed "a strong and sincere request for forgiveness on behalf of the whole Church" to the victims.