

Two Recent Books on Abuse in Consecrated Life

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Risques et Dérives de la Vie Religieuse. By Dysmas de Lassus. Editions du Cerf, Paris, 2020. Pp. 446; €24 cloth; €10.50. Available in English as *Abuses in the Religious Life and the Path to Healing*. Sophia Press Institute, Nashua, 2023.

La Trahison des Pères: Emprise et Abus des Fondateurs de Communautés Nouvelles. By Céline Hoyeau. Montrouge, Bayard, 2021. Pp. 280; €19.90.

THE PAST DECADE has not been a happy one for the Catholic Church in France. It has seen the resignation of a number of its bishops, including the archbishops of Paris, Lyon and Strasbourg and the closure of a number of French-founded religious communities and ecclesial movements. Most of these evolved as part of the new springtime of the Church in France that saw new communities, largely of Charismatic origin, emerging from what some French Catholics experienced as the ruin of traditional faith by the Second Vatican Council. As seminaries and novitiates stood empty, the formation houses of these communities progressively filled with young people in search of a dignified and engaging style of liturgy and prayer and a sense of intense commitment which connected them strongly to the spiritual traditions of a country in which the mystical and religious life have flourished down the centuries. Many entered communities in the aftermath of events like World Youth Day, which took place in Paris in 1997, or the first World Congress of Ecclesial Movements in 1998. Whenever a public gathering of religious was called for, enthusiastic crowds of young members were drafted in and gave an impression of vigor and abundance in the face of dwindling numbers elsewhere in the Church. A few decades on, devastating reports on some of these communities have surfaced which speak of catastrophic systemic failures in which lack of clear boundaries and oversight gave rise to the abuse of power in all its manifestations. Each report and instance of abuse has to be evaluated in its own context, but two books, *Risques et Dérives de la Vie Religieuse*, written by Dysmas de Lassus, Prior General of the Carthusian order, and *La Trahison des Pères*, written by veteran religious reporter Céline Hoyeau, find reason in these particular cases to ask penetrating questions for the future of religious and community life as a whole, with individual organization reports acting as an exemplar of what has happened in general.

The reports on the L'Arche movement and on the Community of Saint John detail the inquiries into the internal life and structures of both institutions, the former founded by Jean Vanier and his spiritual director, Père Thomas Philippe, and the latter by Thomas' brother Père Marie-Dominique Philippe. The reports have been remarkable for the honesty with which they have reflected on the grievous abuses perpetrated by their founders. Both lift the veil covering the lives of widely admired religious leaders who were seriously considered as candidates for future canonization. These reports provoke more questions than answers, not only into the mindset of the founders and the inner workings of the institutes themselves, but into the dynamics that might arise in any similar ecclesial organization. Accusations of parallel systemic and individual abuses have proliferated within France as recently as 2022 when the Mission Thérésienne, a French canonical association of the faithful active in about 20 countries, was shut down by the bishop of Bayeux-Lisieux citing "substantial dysfunctions" in its management and the bishop of Toulon shut down a controversial monastery after the Vatican cancelled the diocese's projected ordinations pending investigation.¹ July 2023 saw Cardinal de Kezel's closure of the Verbe de Vie community in Belgium, founded by French couple Marie-Josette and Georges Bonneval, on the grounds of deep-rooted dysfunctions ranging from spiritual and sexual abuse to situations of coercive control under the leadership of Father Jacques Marin, the community's spiritual director for 27 years, who died in 2019, after a canonical inquiry a few years earlier.² Four months earlier, the Archbishop of Lyon opened an inquiry into the Fraternité de Marie Reine Immaculée amid accusations against its founder, Fr. Marie-Pierre Faye, of spiritual and sexual abuse.³ The list of earlier founders of communities originally idealized by followers and Church leaders alike, only to be subsequently investigated for various types of abuse of power is depressingly long:

1984, Jacky Parmentier (Communauté de la Sainte-Croix); 1991, Jean-Michel Rousseau (Fondacio); 2007, Gérard Croissant, known as Brother Ephraïm (Les Béatitudes); 2010, Louis Rolland (Communauté de Nazareth); 2011, Thierry de Roucy (Points-Cœur); 2015, Marie-

1. Valdemar de Vaux, "French bishop suppresses controversial religious community," *Aleteia*, June 25, 2022, <https://aleteia.org/2022/06/25/french-bishop-suppresses-controversial-religious-community/>.

2. Mathilde de Robin, "La communauté du Verbe de Vie sera dissoute en juillet 2023," *Aleteia*, June 26, 2022, <https://fr.aleteia.org/2022/06/26/la-communauté-du-verbe-de-vie-sera-dissoute-en-juillet-2023/>.

3. "La Fraternité de Marie face au passé trouble de sa fondatrice et d'un ancien modérateur," *Famille chrétienne*, July 3, 2023, <https://www.famillechretienne.fr/39973/article/la-fraternite-de-marie-face-au-passe-trouble-de-sa-fondatrice-et-dun-ancien-modérateur>.

Dominique Philippe (Brothers and Sisters of St John known as ‘Les Petits Gris’); 2015, Thomas Philippe (L’Arche); 2015, Pascal and Marie Annick Pingault (Pain de Vie); 2018, Olivier Fenoy (Office Culturel de Cluny, a theatre company run like a religious community); 2019, Pierre-Marie Delfieux, (Fraternités de Jérusalem); 2019, Jean Vanier (L’Arche); 2020, Georges Finet (Foyers de Charité); 2020 (Missions Etrangères de Paris). In other parts of the world: 2006, Marcial Maciel Degollado (Legionaries of Christ, Mexico); 2012, Alfonso María Durán (Miles Jesu, Rome); 2016, Luigi Prandin (Villareggia Community, Italy); 2016, Luis Fernando Figari (Sodalicio de Vida Cristiana, Peru); 2020, Roberto Juan Yannuzzi (Miles Christi, Argentina); 2020, Enzo Bianchi (Bose); 2021, Mansour Labaki (Lo Tedhal and several homes for Lebanese orphans); 2022 (individual members of Focolare, founded in Italy).

In an interview in 2017, Cardinal Braz de Aviz, Prefect of the then-Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, gave a positive assertion that it is not yet the time for religious life to do nothing but learn the *ars moriendi*. At the same time, he stated that the Congregation was focussing attention on some seventy new religious families, some of which have revealed significant personality problems with their founders, as well as worrying psychological conditioning of the members. Fifteen of these founders were under investigation at the time.⁴ Appointed Apostolic Visitor in the case of the Verbe de Vie community, François Touvet, Bishop of Châlons-en-Champagne, cites the problems of “spiritual abuses, excessive spiritualization, domination, lack of realism and abuse of power,” hidden by an “over-spiritualizing discourse.” Reflecting on the flourishing of new communities in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council he admits, “We were in a period full of hope, after the Second Vatican Council. . . . But there was a kind of decline in many aspects of the life of the Church. And here were movements emerging with unusual forms. We said to ourselves: this is renewal [but] this enthusiasm, which seemed to be renewing the practice and life of the Church with youth and a real influence [. . .] may have lacked discernment and vigilance.” On the issue of members’ relationship with the founders, he points out the difference between the charismatic founding gift for evangelization and the hierarchical dimension of governance. One person may not necessarily have both gifts, and it is necessary to have guarantees in place to ensure that the foundation is truly God’s work, “not the work of our

4. Lorenzo Prezzi and Marco Bernardoni, “Braz de Aviz: non è tempo di ‘ars moriendi,’” *Settimana News*, February 17, 2017, <http://www.settimananews.it/vita-consacrata/braz-de-aviz-non-tempo-ars-moriendi/>.

whims or the pathologies of this or that person. . . .”⁵ His words echo the Church document *Iuvenescit Ecclesia* of 2016, regarding the relationship between hierarchical and charismatic gifts in the life and the mission of the church.⁶ In his speech to the thousands of members of new movements gathered in Rome in 1998, Pope John Paul II spoke of the “the mysterious attraction that the founder holds for all those who become involved in his spiritual experience.”⁷ Two out of the four movement founders who were invited to give special addresses on the day itself have since had their movements or themselves investigated for instances of abuse. The difficulty arises when the mysterious attraction becomes one which becomes coercive or leads members to lose their sense of personal agency and integrity. From the list above it would appear that this happens more often than is comfortable to imagine.

Céline Hoyeau’s investigation looks at the proliferation of new ecclesial movements in the aftermath of Vatican II. She traces the heady days when it seemed as if charismatic leaders with dynamic vision were appearing in almost every diocese and leading members into a fervent following of the Gospel. It is hardly surprising that amid the global struggles to reform and renew theology itself as well as biblical study, the liturgy, the structures of the church, and the formation of its clergy and religious, diocesan and national Church leaders looked with relief and hope at these men and women who were still able to inspire others to give their lives unambiguously to the following of Christ. Are the cases of abuse simply appalling but thankfully rare instances of twisted individuals taking advantage of the innocence of their zealous and uncritical followers, or is there something embedded within the mentality and structures behind religious life and its derivative movements that leaves them open to potential abuse? The abuse of power within religious congregations and movements is by no means a problem restricted to the global north, as witnessed by the Synod Report of 2022 from the world’s religious.⁸ As part of the global Synod, the standing conferences of leaders of religious congregations in Rome, the Unions of Superiors and International Superiors General

5. Marie-Lucile Kubacki and Aymeric Christensen, “Dissolution de la communauté du Verbe de Vie : « L’Église n’a pas été suffisamment vigilante »” *La Vie*, June 27, 2022, <https://www.lavie.fr/christianisme/eglise/dissolution-de-la-communauté-du-verbe-de-vie-eglise-na-pas-ete-suffisamment-vigilante-83079.php>. Author’s own translation.

6. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “*Iuvenescit Ecclesia*,” May 16, 2016, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20160516_iuvenescit-ecclesia_en.html.

7. John Paul II, “Speech at a Meeting with Ecclesial Movements and New Communities,” May 30, 1998, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1998/may/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19980530_riflessioni.html.

8. See UISG/USG, “Synod on Synodality: UISG-USG Contribution,” https://www.uisg.org/files/allegatodocumento/2022/UISG_USG_Synod_Contribution.pdf.

(USG and UISG), asked their members worldwide to undertake a synodal process within their own congregation to gather an idea of how they experienced synodality, or the lack of it, from their particular perspective. There are around two hundred male and two thousand female religious orders and congregations represented within these organizations, the majority of the female groups being small diocesan congregations directly under the jurisdiction of their local bishop. A commission of four theologians who are also religious was asked to collate the material that emerged in six different languages.⁹ Inevitably, given the numbers involved, the voices and concerns of women religious dominated, but what chiefly struck the commission members was the synthesis and accord of opinions overall from women and men of every continent, and many of them strike a chord with Hoyeau's questions. The synod questionnaire that the commission originally sent around the world used the imagery from Jesus' parable of the sower, asking religious to identify "seeds and weeds" of synodality within the church where they lived. While there was a strong critique of clericalism at all levels, there was also a robust self-critique of abuses of power within religious life itself. Respondents name as weeds the persistence of authoritarianism, exclusion, intimidation, rigid imposition of uniformity, outdated mental and structural models, old wounds, and unhealed and unresolved tensions. They raise concerns about a style of formation they detect in some parts of consecrated life that is an obstacle to synodality when it concentrates on an exclusively intimate spirituality which does not favor community discernment, listening to others, or collaborative ministry. They point to potential blind spots within religious communities which can prevent members from recognizing hidden attitudes of resistance, denying painful realities, and discovering the truth.

The concentration of similar problems in France demands its own focus and stands as a paradigm for the same issues elsewhere, as both Hoyeau and de Lassus write from examples within ecclesial movements and religious life. The first of the spiritual giants to fall was Fr. Marie-Dominique Philippe, brother of Fr. Thomas Philippe, who was spiritual director to Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche. The Philippe brothers and Marthe Robin were distantly related while the Philippes' sister, Cécile Philippe, and uncle, Thomas Dehau, both Dominicans, have also been involved in similar investigations. Georges Finet and Gérard Croissant were also closely connected with Marthe Robin, the stigmatist, mystic, and foundress of the Foyers de Charité whose cause for

9. The commission members were: Maria Cimperman, RSCJ, José Cristo Rey García Paredes, CMF, Gemma Simmonds, CJ, and Orlando Torres, SJ. The analysis of the Synod on Synodality USG/UISG Contribution document that follows is based on "Synod on Synodality: UISG-USG Contribution," available at https://www.uisg.org/files/allegato_documento/2022/UISG_USG_Synod_Contribution.pdf.

beatification is under way. Marie-Dominique founded the Community of Saint John, one of three religious congregations of brothers, contemplative and apostolic sisters begun in France along with lay oblate members between 1975–1984. They became renowned for the fervor of their members, visibly younger than those of most established religious congregations of sisters and brothers, drawing their numbers from a generation which seemed alienated from many of the reforms and modernizations of religious life resulting from the Second Vatican Council. For the first twenty years the Community experienced an admirable rate of expansion across several countries, but from 1996 to 2004 it struggled with numerous departures and requests by the hierarchy for restructuring. Three years after the founder died in 2006, honored by Pope Benedict XVI, revelations began to uncover Marie-Dominique’s sexual abuse of adult women in the context of spiritual direction, which occasioned the imposition of a new superior by the local bishop and the departure of a splinter group of most of the Sisters of St John for Spain. They attempted to begin as a new congregation which was dissolved without the possibility of reconstitution under any other form by Pope Benedict in 2013, though they attempted to refound again in 2014.¹⁰ The brothers’ internal report further admits that 167 people have been victims of abuse committed by 72 brothers, both sexual abuse by brothers of adults among their followers and the abuse of younger brothers by their seniors.¹¹ Marie-Dominique’s brother, Thomas Philippe, founded L’Eau Vive, a community where Jean Vanier came under his influence and became a devotee of his eroticised Marian mysticism based on the notion that the Virgin Mary and her Son shared an incestuous sexual relationship. Barred from priestly functions by the Vatican in 1956 when he was found guilty of psychological, spiritual, and sexual abuse, Thomas went on to co-found L’Arche with Jean Vanier at Trosly. There can be no doubt that the work of L’Arche itself, in creating communities of love and respect where members with intellectual disabilities live a fulfilling life alongside volunteers, has been one of the best examples of ecclesial community seen in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. But Trosly also provided the cover for where, undetected, Thomas and Vanier continued the practices associated with their “Marian maximalism” to destructive effect. The Community of Saint John have accepted that the internal dynamics within their community amounted to a “small cult” which allowed Marie-Dominique’s imbalanced teachings to flourish within a closed internal culture. A similar admission has

10. “Chronological Facts Concerning the Contemplative Sisters of Saint John (2009-2014),” *Brothers of Saint John*, <https://csjohn.org/2019/02/chronological-facts/>.

11. Commission interdisciplinaire des Frères de Saint-Jean, “Comprendre et guérir: Origines et analyses des abus dans la famille Saint-Jean,” June 2023, https://freres-saint-jean.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/06/Comprendre_et_Guerir_Juin_2023.pdf.

been made by L'Arche about the perverted mysticism behind Vanier's abuse.¹² A number of French anti-cult associations continue to protest that some communities' and congregations' practice of proselytizing among young adults cuts them off from ties with friends and family and exerts undue psychological pressure on newcomers. Part 2 of the extensive report on Vanier's personal history and activities within L'Arche speaks of the "sectarian dynamics" within the L'Eau Vive community from which it originated and sees the founding nucleus within L'Eau Vive, which continued in some ways to be influential around Vanier, as toxic, a form of "sect [...] hidden within a foundation that is itself at the heart of the Church."¹³

The L'Arche report, which details personal correspondence between Vanier and the women he abused, gives a dramatic and horrifying insight into the sect-like dynamics which have been repeated in so many of the movements and new congregations listed above. A study of religion within secular society, although largely based on Protestant sects in the United States, points to similar elements in new ecclesial movements and religious congregations in the worldwide Catholic context.¹⁴ It sees sects as representing an alternative pattern of religious commitment in societies experiencing secularization, in which religious values are considered to have lost pre-eminence. Already in 1943, two chaplains of the Young Christian Workers had published *La France, pays de mission?*, which explored the growing de-Christianization of the country and the redundancy of a parish system which no longer served its purpose for new types of Christians.¹⁵ Hoyeau sees many of the groups she cites in her book as replicating such sect-like patterns in a contemporary Catholicism that was experiencing profound disenchantment through the growing secularization following two world wars. She also points to the dissatisfaction of the post-Conciliar generation with a Church perceived as having lost the spiritual roots and capacities of previous eras. Charismatic leaders emerged as if by divine providence, who found unconditional support from Pope John Paul II, another providential and charismatic figure. They

12. Solène Tadié, "New report analyzes origins and phenomena behind abuse in France's St. John community", *Catholic World Report*, July 2, 2023, <https://www.catholic-worldreport.com/2023/07/02/new-report-analyzes-origins-and-phenomena-behind-abuse-in-frances-st-john-community/> and Study Commission, "Control and Abuse Investigation on Thomas Philippe, Jean Vanier, and L'Arche," January, 2023, <https://commissiondetude-jeanvanier.org/commissiondetudeindependante2023-empriseetabus/index.php/en/home-english/>.

13. Study Commission, "Control and Abuse Investigation," 203, 337.

14. Bryan R. Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society: Fifty Years On*, ed. Steve Bruce (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

15. Henri Godin and Yvan Daniel, *La France, pays de mission?* (Lyon: Éditions de l'Abeille, 1943).

offered different experiences of community and salvation from those of a Church seen as having lost its way. Effective manipulators of Scripture and of the mystical traditions, many of these leaders embodied a reassuring spiritual authority and attractive new ways of worshipping and believing which seemed to combine the old and the new and to add emotional and bodily expressions of faith and yearning for the divine with an understanding and inclusion of the affective dimension. Inevitably, this drew people in search of belonging and of spiritual reassurance, some of whom were particularly vulnerable. It is precisely that mix of the theological and affective aspects of religious experience that tragically led some of their followers into a bonding bordering on hypnosis which entailed the loss of their critical sense and of their own personal agency.

Hoyeau goes on to claim that these salvific figures-turned-abusers could not have flourished outside “an entire ecosystem” which supported the abuse by drawing admiring disciples under their spell who surrendered to these spiritual masters in ways that were infantile and uncritical. Another fatal part of this ecosystem was a hierarchy disinclined to believe negative reports of priests and “spiritual masters” who seemed to be re-captivating a younger generation for the Church and a lack of critical awareness on issues of abuse on the part of theologians and other experts. Hoyeau’s claims draw dangerously close to blaming the abused for what they have suffered, which is a classic move of perpetrators, and cannot be accepted. But are there questions here that are also relevant in a deeper sense for religious life itself?

From within the monastic tradition, a voice normally silent has spoken out in the aftermath of these abuses to ask critical questions about the risks and potential pitfalls of entering into a way of life that advocates radical self-abandonment. It has been the custom, when Carthusian monks write a book, for the author to remain anonymous, but secrecy is the cloak under which abuse flourishes, so Dom Dysmas de Lassus, Prior General of the Carthusian order, has written under his own name regarding the challenges involved in the governance of religious communities. His book is prefaced by Archbishop José Rodríguez Carballo, Secretary of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. The prior of La Grande Chartreuse explains that his book was inspired by several meetings he had with victims of abuse as well as two years of field work with Dom François You, president of the Conférence Monastique de France, which focused on “sectarian” aberrations within communities. The main concentration of the book is on the way in which community life and the exercise of authority can become abusive when based on dynamics of power rather than of service. Jesus himself speaks of taking his disciples “from the world” (John 15:19). When this is taken literally in communities and develops into a defensive or hostile relationship with the outside world, it can easily turn religious life into a form of cult.

Asceticism and renunciation have been intrinsic to religious life since its origins among the Desert Mothers and Fathers, but when embraced without balance and humility their practice can fall into extremes. De Lassus places justifiable emphasis on a similar equilibrium when it comes to spiritual guidance and discernment, advocating a robust distance between the internal forum and the external to safeguard the integrity and liberty of the individual and avoid a manipulative cult of the leader. The book carries a heart-rending appendix featuring the testimony of a victim of abuse within religious life. It stands as a stark and eye-opening reminder of what is at stake here.

Contemporary religious reading these books might be tempted to distance themselves from the issues that they raise with the comforting thought that such things could never happen within their own congregation, being only a manifestation of imbalance within immature religious groups and movements. The witness of the Synod report suggests otherwise. The religious of the world raise the issue of abusive practices which are clearly the fruit of toxic clericalism, when bishops and clerics abuse their power by using female religious as cheap labor or use the sacraments or public humiliation as mechanisms to control the finances, property, and conscience of religious under their authority.¹⁶ The issue of the sexual abuse of women religious by clergy is becoming better documented but is only one aspect of the misuse of power in this context.¹⁷ Certainly, the proliferation of diocesan religious congregations which have subsequently been investigated for abusive structures and practices has caused a more cautious approach in recent years, as witnessed by the Apostolic Letter of Pope Francis *Authenticum charismatis*, which amended Canon 579 of the Code of Canon Law in November 2020 to ensure that no new congregation is founded without reference to the Holy See.¹⁸

It is perhaps tempting for longer-established religious to see these issues as being remote from their own experience, but the books reviewed here make clear that at the root of all these aberrations lies the misuse of power which can happen in any context. It is easy to see how the language of religious life, with its ideal of total commitment, unconditional self-giving, and submission

16. See Hazel d'Lima, Cletus Zuzarte and Pallavi Xalxo, *It's High Time: Women Religious Speak Up on Gender Justice in the Indian Church*, (Mumbai: St. Paul's Press, 2021).

17. See Rose Gamble, "Vatican women's magazine condemns sexual abuse of nuns by priests," *The Tablet*, February 1, 2019, <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/11319/vatican-women-s-magazine-condemns-sexual-abuse-of-nuns-by-priests>, and Fikayo Olowolagba, "Fight back when mistreated by 'men of the Church'—Pope Francis tells sisters," *Daily Post*, February 2, 2022, <https://dailypost.ng/2022/02/02/fight-back-when-mistreated-by-men-of-the-church-pope-francis-tells-sisters-video/>.

18. Pope Francis, "*Authenticum charismatis*," November 1, 2020, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20201101_authenticum-charismatis.html.

of the will can be perverted to something pernicious and destructive. The very idealism behind religious life is a danger to itself. If, as the saying goes, the good is the enemy of the best, then the perfect can also carry the seeds of destruction of the good. Using the riches of the spiritual traditions and Rules of religious life, de Lassus offers clear and lucid guidance that can effectively be used individually or collectively as an examination of conscience within any religious group or congregation. Victims of abuse repeatedly claim that the denial and disbelief with which their narratives are met is often as bad as the abuse itself. No one attempting to live the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience today can do so in ignorance or avoidance of the challenging issues raised by their experience. De Lassus' and Hoyeau's books make a good starting point for a more self-reflective and coherent approach to the consecrated life of the future.

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