

Report finds late L'Arche founder sexually abused women for decades

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Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche, on March 11, 2015 (AP Photo/Lefteris Pitarakis)

A respected Catholic figure who worked to improve conditions for people with developmental disabilities for more than half a century sexually abused at least six women during most of that period, according to a report released February 22 by the organization he founded, based in France.

The report produced for L'Arche International said the women's descriptions provided enough evidence to show that Jean Vanier engaged in "manipulative sexual relationships" from 1970 to 2005, usually with a "psychological hold" over the alleged victims.

Although he was a layperson and not a priest, many Catholics hailed Vanier, who was Canadian, as a living saint. He died last year at age 90.

"The alleged victims felt deprived of their free will and so the sexual activity was coerced or took place under coercive conditions," the report, commissioned by L'Arche last year and prepared by UK-based GCPS Consulting, said. It did not rule

out potential other victims.

None of the women was disabled. The #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements, however, have forced a recognition that power imbalances such as those in spiritual relationships can breed abuse.

As part of the L'Arche-commissioned inquiry, six adult women without links to each other said Vanier engaged in sexual relations with them, often in the context of spiritual accompaniment.

The women reported similar facts, and Vanier's sexual misconduct was often associated with alleged "spiritual and mystical justifications," the report states.

A statement released by L'Arche France stressed that some women still have "deep wounds."

The report noted similarities with the pattern of abuse by Thomas Philippe, a Catholic priest Vanier called his "spiritual father." Philippe, who died in 1993, has been accused of sexual abuse by several women.

A statement from L'Arche International said analysis of archives shows that Vanier "adopted some of Father Thomas Philippe's deviant theories and practices." Philippe was banned from exercising any public or private ministry in a trial led by the Catholic Church in 1956 for his theories and the sexual practices that stemmed from them.

In a letter to L'Arche members, L'Arche International leaders Stephan Posner and Stacy Cates-Carney told of their shock at the news and condemned Vanier's actions.

"For many of us, Jean was one of the people we loved and respected the most. . . . While the considerable good he did throughout his life is not in question, we will nevertheless have to mourn a certain image we may have had of Jean and of the origins of L'Arche," they wrote.

Other devoted fans and Catholic commentators voiced deep disappointment at the findings. Some held up the case as a reason to bring long waits back to the saint-making process, to make sure candidates for canonization hold up to scrutiny long after death.

JD Flynn, the editor in chief of Catholic News Agency, said the report's conclusions hit his family particularly hard: Flynn has two children with Down syndrome, one of whom is named for Vanier.

"This is devastating for our family," he tweeted. "Please pray for us, and also for L'Arche."

John Gehring, program director at the US advocacy network Faith in Public Life, said Vanier attracted so many devotees because he was a "quiet refugee from that chaos" of the institutional Catholic Church.

"Part of why the Vanier news is so gutting, I think, is that he offered an authentic path into deep spirituality for many detached from the institutional church and disillusioned with clerical leaders who abused power," he tweeted. "The truth is painful."

Vanier worked as a Canadian navy officer and professor before turning to charity work. A visit to a psychiatric facility prompted him to found L'Arche in 1964 as an alternative living environment where people with developmental disabilities could be participants in their community instead of patients.

L'Arche is now a federation of communities in 38 countries that are home to thousands of people, both with and without disabilities.

Vanier, who was unmarried, also traveled the world to encourage dialogue across religions and was awarded the 2015 Templeton Prize for spiritual work, as well as France's Legion of Honor. He was the subject of a documentary shown at the 2017 Cannes Film Festival called *Jean Vanier: The Sacrament of Tenderness*. —Sylvie Corbet, Associated Press. Nicole Winfield contributed to this story from Rome.