

Nuns alleging abuse by former Jesuit Marko Rupnik plead with Francis for investigation

by [Claire Giangravé](#)

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Laura Sgro, from left, Gloria Branciani, and Mirjam Kovac, former members of the Loyola community of sisters co-founded by Marko Rupnik, during a news conference in Rome on February 21.

Ex-nuns who say they suffered abuse at the Loyola religious community co-founded by former Jesuit priest Marko Rupnik asked Pope Francis during an emotional news conference Wednesday to investigate the church's cover-up of the alleged abuse and publish the findings.

"These events open a window to a much wider reality," said Gloria Branciani, 59, who claimed sexual abuse, abuse of conscience and spiritual abuse for years at the hands of Rupnik. The news conference in Rome marked the first time she has spoken publicly about the matter.

“I wish to break this cycle of silence and loneliness that I found myself in for many years. A deafening silence that still engulfs many more of us,” she added.

In 1987 Branciani entered the Loyola community of Mengeš in Slovenia, which was founded by Rupnik and Ivanka Hosta. Rupnik was a well-known artist, whose mosaics still decorate hundreds of religious sites around the world, and he was considered an influential spiritual leader for Catholics in Slovenia and beyond.

Branciani was among the first to report Rupnik to the church hierarchy but said she was ousted and silenced. In 2020, Rupnik was excommunicated by the Vatican’s Department for the Doctrine of the Faith for absolving a woman he had had sexual relations with, but he was surprisingly reinstated two weeks later.

It remains unclear what role Pope Francis has had in these proceedings, since he would have normally had to sign off on the decisions.

After investigations in February 2023, and with more reported abuse allegations against Rupnik, the Jesuit order was forced to admit the accusations against him were credible and expelled him from the order.

Rupnik remains a priest, and Francis has asked that the statute of limitations be waived and the case reopened. The doctrinal department is examining the case, the Vatican confirmed on Wednesday, and has reached out to the various individuals and institutions involved.

The Jesuit order has assured that it will support a Vatican effort to investigate alleged cover-up by the church.

“If the Holy See wanted to create such a commission, we will gladly collaborate,” said Johan Verschueren, delegate of the Father General for the Interprovincial Roman Houses and Works, in a comment “After all, we have nothing to hide,” he wrote.

Branciani met Rupnik in Rome and said he was immediately very welcoming and kind, showering her with compliments on one hand but also, she claimed, isolating her from other relationships. She said he would invite her to his atelier, located on the same premises as his apartment and the Aletti Center cultural community in Rome.

Rupnik would stare at parts of her body as he painted, she said, and would embrace her after celebrating private masses. "Slowly, these hugs and kisses became increasingly more intense," she said. "He would say that he kissed me just as he would kiss the altar upon which he celebrated the Eucharist."

Branciani said she was naïve and insecure and fell prey to the psychological abuse of her spiritual guide. Rupnik eventually asked her to follow him to Slovenia, where, she claimed, the abuse continued and became more violent. With the pretext of introducing her to Slovenian culture, Rupnik would sexually abuse her in the car, she said.

After she made her perpetual vows, she said, Rupnik told her that to replicate the Holy Trinity they had to involve another woman. "We had to invite another sister to experience sexuality with us," Branciani said, "to represent the Holy Spirit uniting our relationship."

Rupnik adopted what he described as a "healthy aggressiveness" in their sexual encounters, she said, and his psychological control was such that the two religious sisters suffering the same kind of abuse did not speak to each other about what they were experiencing, Branciani said.

In June 1991, they returned to Rome, where Rupnik continued his abuse, according to Branciani, who said he forced her to go to pornographic cinemas with him. Branciani said she felt as though her only escape was suicide.

In 1993 Branciani said she found the courage to report the abuse to the mother superior of her community, Hosta. "When I reported the abuse, she pretended not to know anything. There was complete silence by the foundress, but she wanted to cover up for her personal reasons. She didn't want her community and projects to end," she said.

Rupnik was forced to leave the community in 1993 by order of Archbishop Alojzij Šuštar, who headed the Diocese of Ljubljana at the time, but no explanation was offered as to the reasons behind his removal.

Branciani said she was controlled by her community and dismissed by other religious figures, including the Jesuit provincial at the time, who she said believed Rupnik instead of the victims.

Finally, on Good Friday in 1994, Branciani ran away from the community, never to return.

Branciani is one of 20 religious sisters, among the 41 members of Loyola, who claim to have been sexually, psychologically, or spiritually abused by Rupnik.

Slovenian-born Mirjam Kovac, 62, was also a member of the community, and while she said Rupnik never sexually abused her, she said she suffered psychological abuse and abuse of power. She remained within the community, she said, even as more and more sisters came forward with claims of abuse by Rupnik, but she said she slowly began to see the truth.

“Even after Rupnik was sent away, the seed of abuse remained in the community,” she told journalists on Wednesday. The Community of Loyola was eventually dissolved and its co-founder, Hosta, was removed from her role as mother superior.

“We regret that religious institutions don’t take advantage of our experiences to react to the reality of abuse,” Kovac said, adding that instead nuns who have come forward were met by a “rubber wall.”

On the five-year anniversary of a major abuse summit called by Pope Francis at the Vatican, which promised to enact a “zero tolerance policy” on abuse, victims and survivors called foul.

Anne Barrett Doyle, co-director of BishopAccountability.org, a group advocating for clergy abuse victims since 2003, compared the Rupnik case to other high-profile cover-ups in the Catholic Church, such as that of ex-priest and founder of the Legion of Christ Marcial Maciel and influential US prelate and ex-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick.

“The Rupnick case shows that little has changed in this era of reforms,” Barrett Doyle said at the event, and she called on Pope Francis to commission an independent investigation into how the Catholic hierarchy handled the allegations against Rupnik, beginning in the 1990s. She added that this includes what Pope Francis might have known about the case.

Laura Sgro, who has handled many high-profile cases within the Vatican and will be legally representing Rupnik’s victims, did not specify whether they will bring a civil case against the former Jesuit. Speaking at the event, she made a strong appeal

addressed to the many women and nuns who she claims have come to her office asking for help, telling stories of rape and abuse by clergy, urging them to come forward and speak up, not to bishops but to civil authorities and the police.

“People who do what was done to Gloria must go to jail!” she said. —Religion News Service