

Dear Father Federico Lombardi, SJ; your Holiness, Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops, Fathers, Superiors, sisters and brothers in Christ:

My name is Anastasia Demidova. As a survivor of sexual [abuse in the congregation of Missionaries of Charity \(MC\)](#), I would be very grateful to you for reading this document and giving it appropriate attention for the sake of all victims of sexual and spiritual religious abuse while in religious service.

In 2014, during my postulancy of MC in Chinsurah, India, I was sexually and spiritually victimized for two months by Sr. Vicuna, the superior and mistress of our formation house. Subsequently, in 2019, I initiated an official accountability process with the MC authorities, bearing in mind my sisters in Christ - past, present and future ones - who suffered and continue to suffer abuse. My goal was to implement preventative measures, responsibility and accountability within the MC according to the guidelines of multiple papal orders and canonical standards. Given the enormous changes in awareness of, and response to, sexual abuse within the Church in the past decade, the actual response of MC was shocking and could even be potentially life-threatening to those more vulnerable.

I wish to share with you, as shepherds of God's flock, the events of the past two years for two reasons. First, this is an appalling example of covering up sexual abuse after the Papal orders and decrees, revealing an enormous disconnect between Vatican instructions and an actual practice in the field. Secondly, since the houses of the MC congregation are located in various countries, their grave inability to deal with issues of sexual abuse could potentially have an accumulative influence on the reputation and the mission of our Church in multiple parishes, on regional and international levels.

To summarize my own story- I was abused as a postulant in a remote formation house in India by a person who was both the superior and mistress of the house. The individual, Sr. Vicuna MC, had abused other MC sisters before me and had complaints filed against her. Rather than address the problem of her sexually abusing her subordinates and fellow sisters, the leadership of the congregation transferred her to different houses, and directed her to undergo “spiritual treatment”. Finally, either due to miscommunication between MC authorities on the matter, lack of perceived significance of the matter, or an excessive level of trust towards the outcome of the “spiritual treatment”, Sr. Vicuna was assigned to a position of authority again. It was in this capacity that she abused me and attempted to abuse at least one other sister in the house at the same time.

The MC authorities learned about the sexual abuse that I was undergoing through the witness of a fellow sister in March 2014. The abuser was transferred, again (!), and I was expelled from the congregation to Russia, under the pretense of a political excuse: “Putin has invaded Ukraine, you must go”. The pretext to remove me from the MC was as transparent as it was inappropriate for a Christian society. At that point I had been in religious service for many years: in formation of MC; as coordinator of a Catholic youth

center in Moscow; as an assistant in MC and L'arche houses for people with disabilities in Poland; the Czech Republic; Ukraine; Russia and India for over ten years. I had no idea what Putin did at that time, and could not understand how this could be connected to my own vocation.

In fact, as I learned from other victims of abuse in the congregation, it wasn't. MC was solely following its long-standing pattern of treating sexual abuse within its own ranks - transferring the abuser, while silencing and removing the victim. Prolonged abuse by a formator who was merely transferred isn't a first instance in MC either, at least one another victim describes the same pattern regarding sr. Bharoti MC, central figure in formations in Europe for dozens of years. Just to mention a few more examples- one another professed sister, had reported abuse and a pattern of abuse about a fellow sister, knowing this, society had continued with the sister to the final vows, despite the multiple reports. In a mistaken and ignorant manner, which continues up to this day, abuse was treated as "chastity sin".

The misunderstanding and ignorance on the issue of sexual and domestic abuse endangers not only sisters and brothers in MC, but also the "poorest of the poor" under its care. In my own years with MC houses, I have witnessed multiple instances of children and mentally disabled being sexually abused by volunteers, and others, while the pattern of MC reaction remained pretty much the same and usually went through three stages- denial, resistant and very slow intervention, or not, and finally silencing the victims and the witnesses- sisters, and outsiders alike. Even after the resistant acknowledgment and action to stop the abuse, no accountability process is done. This is in fact another very significant characteristic of MC organizational culture- an absence of accountability, investigation and prevention mechanisms, following severe trauma of those under its care- the mechanisms are considered regular for institutions engaged in similar work. Their absence constitutes a severe harm and danger to the most vulnerable in human societies, those who can not protect and care for themselves, who have no resources to complain or demand.

During the two years since the beginning of the official investigation on my case, the MC has intentionally provided false information to multiple canonical authorities; jeopardized my communication with CICSAL and the preliminary canonical investigation; and threatened me with legal prosecution if I continue to talk about the abuse. Finally in February, 2021, MC committed to defending the abuser, while defaming me and other victims of sexual abuse within MC to public media outlets and supporters.

Missionaries of Charity's defense was advised and strategized by a powerful US attorney from the Bush family circle, a former US government official. One would think that the scenario is completely inappropriate and excessively aggressive towards a Russian victim of sexual abuse which happened in India, but I suppose the stakes are high. Suppressing the issue of sexual abuse is the order's modus operandi, and keeping a code of silence takes priority over ending the actual abuse, and the deep calling for an accountability which is in the heart of the MC spiritual charisma.

The actual communication, aggressive and threatening, was done by sr. Dominga MC, located in Bronx, USA, who was appointed by a superior general sr. Prema MC to be the representative for sexual abuse cases- “the safe address”. This was an extremely unsafe experience for me, which has aggravated my own PTSD gravely, and I am afraid to think how much pressure is put on sisters who are more vulnerable than myself.

The importance of MC order as a missionary and social agent can not be contested and is widely known and acknowledged. The tragedy of MC is that little has changed since its inception in 1946. What was a good enough standard of care for its own and the poor, for several nuns in post-colonial India today represents an enormous travesty, especially so, since as I have learned the hard way, in my years with MC, and in this process, there is no internal will for a change and reformation towards the Papal standards of an accountability, responsibility and care.

The explanation might be that to this day, MC is dramatically different from any other congregation in our Church. Structurally, it does not fall under any regional institution in the areas it serves, which means the current efforts of many committed Catholics to prevent sexual abuse are often ignored, and not attended by MC sisters and brothers. Due to severe control over information intake, many of the changes in Church policy and standards are also not known among the members of the congregation.

The case of the Missionaries of Charity is an especially poignant example of various risk factors in a religious order which make abuse more likely:

- MC still exercises corporal punishment, which takes a severe physical toll on sisters.
- Sisters’ passports and other personal documents are held by their superiors.
- Sisters must receive permission from superiors for any communication with the outside world.
- The toll of daily physical labor on sisters is extreme, and the work is frequently very demanding, including moving heavy loads.
- MC sisters sleep an average of six or fewer hours per day; in some positions, even less.
- The sisters’ physical and mental health is badly cared for.
- Sisters are not allowed to study, or join any professional training outside the Church structures.
- Sisters are allowed only one month of vacation and family visit in ten years, without any right to choose where to spend this vacation. Sisters are required to go to their “home” location, regardless of the actual connection and the relations to the original community.

- MC sisters sleep in shared rooms of four to twenty women at once.
- Regarding the risk factors considering abuse of the target population, the missionaries work with the “poorest of the poor”, i.e. populations who have less recourse to complain, and are less likely to do so. These are also the populations that will not demand accountability.
- Due to the traumatic background of some of the sisters as well as excessive workloads, psychological and domestic abuse is an integral part of the congregation’s organizational culture.
- In many places sisters are still instructed to use a bucket of water to wash themselves, regardless of the climate or the actual hygienic standard of the area. Many MC houses refuse to install washing machines. This adds an additional (and unnecessary) burden and constitutes a severe hygienic hazard, since a significant number of people sheltered in MC houses suffer from infectious diseases. This pattern is especially harmful now, during the global pandemic, when MC’s refusal to provide proper hygienic standards in the name of “poverty” is irresponsible and dangerous. This neglectful pattern is aggravated by the architectural specifics of the MC convents, which does not allow a proper space for quarantine, all together leading to a high number of deaths among sisters around the world.
- MC sisters do not receive appropriate training on physical safety, are forbidden from reading any literature not connected directly to the canon of the MC library.
- MC sisters are also forbidden from forming any kind of friendships. This leads to isolation and loneliness, making them more vulnerable prey for an abuser to exploit.
- The order’s spiritual organizational culture, which has not received any significant update since 1946, admonishes the sisters to accept every pain and abuse as a blessing.
- Every word spoken by a superior is to be considered as the word of the Lord, and should be adhered without questioning.
- The congregation does not distinguish between sexuality and abuse. Any and all intimate conduct is considered a sin of both sides, regardless of consent or actual power relations. Numerous victims of different forms of abuse (from sisters who were gang- raped by outsiders to sisters who were sexually assaulted by their superiors and fellow sisters) report that the reaction of the leadership is exactly the same. From Mother Teresa herself, to the current leadership, victimised sisters have been instructed “do not tell it to anyone else”. When they do, they are threatened with internal and external sanctions.
- Inside the congregation, there is significant social inequality between sisters from the global south and north and sisters of different skin color. This leads to additional vulnerability among darker-skinned sisters. Sisters from poorer backgrounds are also more vulnerable and more in

danger, as leaving the congregation might mean returning to a horrible standard of living, especially in old age, since regardless the number of years in which sister has contributed her hard work, and the state of her health among leaving the MC, the congregation only provides her with few hundreds of dollars upon leaving.

- Until last year, I was still in contact with MC's different houses around the world. I can testify that even when a particular superior suggests ways to overcome the hardships mentioned above, they are not heard. The current leadership of the congregation does not listen to the sisters in the field.
- Mostly, sisters in each house are required to attend confession with one priest chosen by the congregation. In my own situation, the confessor was a close friend of the abuser and when I tried to share with him what had happened he kept repeating "child, your superior is never wrong, she is a voice of God."

One might ask, "how bad of an issue can sexual abuse be in a women-lead organization?" Given the structure of MC, and since the sisters have influence on hundreds of thousands of lives, the situation is grave.

Again, I must note that sexual abuse awareness and training is significant not only to prevent it from happening within the order, but also because of the hundreds of thousands of vulnerable persons with whom MC works. Some of these vulnerable, impoverished individuals suffer from sexual abuse in their own homes or in MC's houses. For an illustration, from my own visits of the houses, a sexual abuse prevention in children's homes in Calcutta is literally absent - anyone from the street can sign up as a volunteer and will be allowed to enter the houses for orphans and people with mental disabilities, with no background check, and no supervision.

During the two years of my own struggle, I spoke to multiple religiose and former religiose, victims, victims fo sexual abuse within other congregations - and saw that in almost every other place in our Church positive change and accountability is taking place in the last several years. This happened due to the bold work of the victims themselves; the commitment of religious sisters and brothers; courageous bishops and fathers and the sincere engagement of Pope Francis himself. However, this was not the case within MC. The sisters of this congregation and those in touch with the order remain as unprotected as ever before.

At the very foundation of it - the ideological dismay of MC towards modern standards of care, training and education, which leads to poor quality of care to the most vulnerable and of its own. Numerous times the substandard care became a topic of public interest. The concerns raised ranged from MC's housing of infectious patients in conditions favorable for disease transmission to absence of investigative measures following the death and trauma in MC facilities.

Whether MC chooses to self-identify as social and medical workers or not, the order purports to perform social and medical work and as such should observe standards of care and protection of the vulnerable. This is true not only of patients seeking care, but also of the sisters and workers who experience severe burn out, physical exhaustion and labor related trauma and disease. The lack of sanitary conditions and dangerous work lead to an exhaustion which in its turn leads to an increase in vulnerability. This all happens while MC is in possession of an extreme abundance of donated resources. Which in this stage should be urgently used to improve the quality of care and protection for both MC's own and the poor under its care. To prevent abuse, sexual, domestic and psychological, an all-encompassing reform of the standards of care, responsibility, accountability and training in the order is very badly needed.

The preliminary investigation for my case was done by Dr. Helen Costigane, a committed British canon lawyer, who got engaged by the MC themselves, whose recommendations towards MC were as follows:

All sisters should be invited to disclose to a trusted external individual any allegations of abuse, as soon as possible. This needs to be done in such a way as to protect the good name of every individual, until investigations have taken place.

- 1. Psychological testing for all who seek admittance to the congregation.*
- 2. That if an aspirant/novice/sister exhibits the need for some psychological support and counselling, this should be given by an external, qualified, and competent person. It should NEVER fall to a superior to assume this role.*
- 3. That superiors, before taking office, be given training in maintaining boundaries, and in dealing with difficult people. Again, this training should be given by appropriately qualified people.*
- 4. That all sisters are given formation on human development issues, including psycho-sexual development, in maintaining appropriate boundaries, and in reporting allegations of abuse.*
- 5. That any new novice/aspirant director receives appropriate supervision (ie she discusses any issues arising from her work with a suitable and more experienced member of the congregation on a regular basis).*
- 6. That an appropriate external channel of communication is established so that any kind of abuse (physical, psychological, sexual, spiritual) can be reported swiftly, and that procedures are put in place to ensure that these are documented and followed up.*

7. That any allegation is reported to the police as appropriate and/or a canonical investigation takes place. If an allegation is made, the sister should step away from her office until the investigation is concluded. Decisions would then have to be made on the steps to be taken (i) if a sister is found guilty; (ii) if there is a reasonable belief that she continues to pose a threat to others.”

In short, MC did not follow neither my own suggestions, which were raised to them in 2019, along the same lines, nor dr Costigane’.

Below is the list of the additional hardships I have encountered. I hope this information can be useful for those who work to prevent abuse.

When the canon investigation began in 2019 it was still very hard to understand the process of the canon inquiry. It has since become much easier.

It was almost impossible to understand the canonical system, starting with the why’s and how’s of the investigation, and ending with the inappropriate, arrogant and aggressive manner in which the CICSAL, biased due to their connections with MC, was responding to my requests on the process. It is certain that at least the one person who was in communication with me, had an outdated view of Church-sexual abuse survivor relations- a perception that an investigation of sexual abuse is purely in the interests of the survivor, and the Church at its turn has a choice on whether or not to respond to allegations. This needs to urgently change. [As stated in Fr. Lombardi article](#) on the progress of sexual abuse prevention in the Church, published on the Vatican website, 26.08.21, prevention and accountability for sexual abuse are christian spiritual and humanistic obligations and are in direct interest of the Church itself, and the failure to comply with modern standards of accountability severely harms our ability to proclaim the Gospel. In the case of many survivors of religious abuse at the hands of their superiors, including in my own vocation, this also means a loss of committed servants of the Lord. Our vocations were effectively ended due to abuse.

Below is the action which is necessary and demanded now in regard to the MC congregation, in order to bring it to a compliance with current modern Church strategies, and Papal orders:

From local Church authorities:

- To ensure that each MC sister understands the nature of sexual abuse and the modern standarts of human rights and dignity;
- To ensure that for each MC house will be conducted an external structured training on sexual abuse, and the rights of each sister to choose a confessor will be ensured;

- To inquire from MC leadership, especially of Sr. Prema, the Superior General of MC, regarding the measures which were introduced for protection of each sister and the vulnerable under the care of the MC houses. Additionally, to demand accountability of every superior of the respective houses to guarantee the protective and preventive measures are put in place;
- To give special attention towards the MC houses regarding care and protection of children and vulnerable adults. To dedicate attention to the standards of rest and well-being and professional burnout recovery of MC sisters, it's workers and volunteers;
- Ensure that MC sisters actively participate in every possible educational activity connected to abuse and neglect, which happens on the regional and national levels of our Church;
- Establish an independent safe address and inform local sisters, volunteers, workers and the vulnerable under MC care of the possibility of turning to it, should the need arise;
- Demand each MC house to distribute and hang information on safety measures available within the parish in a visible location in the houses.

From the International Union of Superior Generals:

- To give special attention to the congregation of Missionaries of Charity, as non-complying with Papal orders and instructions on response and prevention of sexual abuse, and to the multiple factors of disempowerment and human rights violation of ordinary sisters within the order.

From the nuncios and Vatican officials:

- to insure that the Holy Father and other Vatican authorities are aware to the issue of sexual abuse and human rights violations within MC congregation; Judging from teh experiences of different sisters, ex sisters- victims of abuse, in this point of time, only direct intervention of the Vatican will bring the necessary and immediate change which are necessary within the MC order. Such intervention shall be based on an all-encompassing investigation by the Vatican into the structural problem of neglect within the order. As part of this, an introduction of an internal and external system for investigation upon each accident of harm happening within the MC facilities shall be introduced. Each house should comply with modern standards of education and care for humanitarian workers, as well as fair labor standards for the religious, the volunteers and the employees of the congregation.

Risk Reduction Summary

As I have learned the very hard way, the current leadership of MC congregation does not have an aspiration to adhere to the guidelines and the standards of human dignity to which we are called in the topic of respect of life and pain. This is why I have to turn to You, as to the shepherds of God's flock, to insure that the systematic changes which are required in order to decrease the vulnerability and insure the protection of the MC sisters, brothers and fathers, its employees, volunteers, and the poor:

- Sisters shall be allowed to freely choose a confessor and freely approach and communicate with any Church, community or government authority relevant to their region or request;

- Each sister shall have her own stipend money savings, sufficient for independent relocation and life for about three months, which can be used in case of emergency;
- Sisters shall be allowed to form friendships with their sisters, parishioners, volunteers and employees, they should also be allowed to contact and communicate with their networks within reasonable religious service limits. Sisters shall be provided training on healthy communication patterns and boundaries within close relations;
- Sisters shall receive relevant education and training on issues of medical and social care, psychological, domestic and sexual abuse;
- Special attention shall be given to the topics of inequality and power abuse based on age, skin color and social background;
- Sisters should have an opportunity to take more frequent vacations and rest and be allowed to choose locations for travel;
- Sisters shall hold their own documents and the rights to make every decision about their legal status - including application for additional citizenship, relevance of longer visa and the like;
- Sisters shall have proper labor conditions - their sleep time should increase, heavy lifting should be limited, and each sister should have the ability to receive additional rest needed for any recovery. Appropriate hygienic conditions shall be introduced with washing machines installed in every house and hygiene being brought to modern standards;
- Sisters shall be provided access to the external, professionally solid psychological support of their choice, they also should have time and the right to visit group therapy and support groups of their choice;
- Sisters should have enough money for safe travel in their respective cities and countries. Safety of sisters in travel shall be guaranteed;
- Sisters leaving the congregation shall be insured a minimum wage for the country in which they are remaining or choose to live for at least two years, until reintegration. Sisters who have not received professional training before getting into MC service should be encouraged and supported financially to attend professional training of their choice in order to facilitate employment and reintegration into secular society;
- Sisters victims of sexual abuse shall be treated on individual basis, psychologically and materially supported, with their medical and psychological expenses compensated. They should receive at least 5 years of compensation at the rate of minimum wage of the respective countries, to insure reintegration and rehabilitation;

- Known and reported allegations of sexual abuse and previous complaints shall be grounds for denying final vows to the perpetrators;
- For sisters serving in heavy physical conditions, including “shishu bhavan” (children homes), houses of homeless, houses of sick and dying, MC should provide yearly a two-week paid external professional recovery and rest services. The society should also ensure an annual medical check up for each sister.
- An open letter shall be issued to former sisters with an invitation to report sexual abuse if such has accrued, proper investigation shall be made and if found guilty the abusive sister shall be properly rehabilitated as an abuser and not given any position of authority anymore. The society should take appropriate measures to support victims, and their recovery;
- The MC society shall provide continuous training on inequality issues;
- Each instance of death and severe trauma of individuals under MC care shall be internally and externally investigated. Each sister should have the ability and be encouraged to report incidents to the relevant governmental and Church authorities.
- The standards of labor for MC employess shall be brought up to international fair labor standards. Salaries shall be average wage in every country, workers shall be supplied with official labor contracts, and have the ability to claim workers’ compensation in case of on-the-job injury;

Sisters and brothers in Christ!

Our Lord calls us to attentive love to one another, care, responsibility and accountability, as in the letter of reverend father Lombardi, our mission to preach the Gospel demands us to the highest degree of respect to human life and dignity. In the past few years, the canon standards of care and accountability on sexual abuse have been significantly updated by the Vatican to account to this calling.

On 10th of September 1946 Mother Teresa had a “vocation within vocation” to help the poorest of the poor and bring God’s Love to the most vulnerable” and impoverished, “sating His Infinite Thirst for Love and Souls”. On this day, let us pray and take action for the most vulnerable within our Church, those victimised inside it, and by its own servants,

Please pray for me, and our sisters and brothers who were abused while in religiose service, and for the grace of repentance and the salvation of the souls of the abusers,

In Christ,

Anastasia Demidova

Postulant in Missionary of Charity, 2014, India, Chinsurah

Professional recommendation and analysis was kindly provided by psychosocial consultant Yana Knopova

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any follow up questions,

caramcsandra@gmail.com

10/09/2021