

## Episode 7: Silence

**ERIKA LANTZ:** Before we start, I want to let you know that this episode contains descriptions of alleged sexual abuse.

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**ELI ANASTASIA:** In the beginning was the word. And the word was with God. And in silence, the word of God is pronounced.

**ERIKA:** Eli Anastasia Demidova was a nun with the Missionaries of Charity until 2014. He now uses he/him pronouns, and mostly goes by the name Eli. But he asked that we refer to him as Eli Anastasia. Anastasia is the name when he was a sister in the MCs. So that's what we'll do.

Eli Anastasia always loved silence. Praying in silence brought him close to God. He's fond of a quote from Mother Teresa: "In the silence, God speaks."

**ELI ANASTASIA:** It is not empty -- silence. Silence, uh, filled with presence, presence, something which is greater than human being, than universe, than anything else. This presence of something which is untouchable.

**ERIKA:** But now, silence is painful. Since he left the Missionaries of Charity in 2014, he avoids it. He leaves a television on when he's at home. Especially at night.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** To make some kind of noise.

**ERIKA:** Why do you think silence is hard?

**ELI ANASTASIA:** Because it comes back, the memories back. Maybe probably night is connected to the time when everything was happening. This anxiety, again, comes, and the memories comes back. Just, never, never I can sleep in silence.

**ERIKA:** From Rococo Punch and iHeartRadio, this is "The Turning." I'm Erika Lantz. Part Seven: Silence.

**ERIKA:** Um, alright. I'm just gonna press record on my end. Let's see. So your headphones are plugged in, right?

**ELI ANASTASIA:** Yeah.

**ERIKA:** When we video chat, Eli Anastasia smiles a lot, in this earnest, almost shy way.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** Like that is better?

**ERIKA:** Testing, testing. Yeah. That's way better. Yeah. Yeah.

**ERIKA:** Eli Anastasia is 33 years old. He's originally from Russia. There's this sweetness that radiates from him when he talks. He always wears a cap on his head with all his hair tucked into it.

Today, Eli Anastasia calls himself a human rights defender. He advocates for the LGBTQ community and abuse victims. But back in 2014, he was 26 years old, and he was a postulant in the Missionaries of Charity.

He was stationed in West Bengal, India, in a city called Chinsurah. It's a small city by Indian standards -- about 300,000 people. Even though they were in a city, Eli Anastasia says the MC house felt isolated -- like they were living off the map. There weren't many Christians in the area, and without cars, they had to walk two hours to get to a church for Mass on Sunday.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** No television, no radio, no news in general in the city. We never knew what was happening. It's very hot. Sometimes it is horrible raining, a lot of monkeys, which are destroying everything around you.

**ERIKA:** Despite the isolation and the monkeys that tore up the MCs' garden, Eli Anastasia loved being there.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** I was so happy that my aim was just, I want to serve God. I love God. I just want to live a proper life, and to pray, and to love the poor and so on.

**ERIKA:** He asked his fellow sisters how to say words in Bengali, so he could talk to the people who lived there.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** "Please teach me how to tell them God loves you. I have to tell people about love." I was just happy person!

**ERIKA:** He remembers the first time he met his mistress -- the nun in charge of his spiritual formation and day-to-day life. The mistress was *also* the superior of the house -- usually those positions are separate -- so it was like the mistress was both Eli Anastasia's *boss* and his *boss's* boss.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** Something in her was just frightening me. Maybe it was just psychological, because my vocation is dependent on this person, or I don't know.

**ERIKA:** But Eli Anastasia told me after he'd been there a couple of weeks, the mistress, who we're not naming, started showing him special attention. She ate meals with him, just the two of them. She talked about mutual acquaintances. She empathized with challenges Eli Anastasia had faced in the past.

In one conversation, his mistress said she'd received a message from the Virgin Mary -- that Mary told her to become Eli Anastasia's spiritual mother: his personal mentor and guide.

Eli Anastasia showed us a note he says he received from his mistress. It says, "My dear little spiritual child ... Thank you ... for accepting me as your spiritual mum." And then warns, "This note is only for you..."

All of this seemed strange given MC rules against close friendship and special attention. But Eli Anastasia didn't question it; it wasn't his place to question.

Then, one evening, they were in the sacristy, a room off the chapel. They were alone. Eli Anastasia's mistress asked him to sit next to her on a stool. Then the mistress stood up and pulled Eli Anastasia's head to her belly. She held it there. She uttered these phrases, like she was soothing him.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** "Mother Mary said, 'You need so much attention. You need special attention and care.'" And, like, I'm sitting at the time, I remembered, what is going on? Why she's doing like that? Because I didn't know -- it was lasting half an hour, 40 minutes. It was so long. How to react? She's superior. She's mistress. What she is doing? I don't understand. I'm just praying, "Just God, let it stop! What is going on?"

**ERIKA:** Around this time, Eli Anastasia says, his mistress began sexualizing their day-to-day interactions. At the breakfast table, she read aloud letters from Mother Teresa that mentioned issues like masturbation. Sometimes in class, she read from a controversial spiritual text that hints at an incestuous relationship between Jesus and his mother, Mary. Eli Anastasia thought, "This is bizarre." But he kept to his duties.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** But everything turned worse. I don't know how many weeks passed, maybe two, three weeks from the beginning had passed.

**ERIKA:** His mistress asked if he wanted to join her for night adoration -- basically a prayer session. Eli Anastasia was excited; it was a chance for real silence.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** No sounds, no noise, just only God and you, and this is wonderful!

**ERIKA:** After the evening bell rang at 10 p.m., Eli Anastasia went to the chapel. His mistress sat close and shared stories from her life. By 2 or 3 a.m., Eli Anastasia was falling asleep. He asked for permission to go to bed, get a couple of hours rest before the morning bell.

The next day, the mistress asked him again, "Please join me for night prayers." Eli Anastasia was sleep-deprived from the night before but agreed.

Again, they stayed in the chapel until early in the morning. Eli Anastasia says this time, when he started to nod off, the mistress pulled his head onto her lap. Then the mistress repeated the odd phrases.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** "Mother Mary asked me to be your mother. I will be good mother to you. God wants to unite with you." And so on.

**ERIKA:** Like she's lulling you, 'cause you're so tired?

**ELI ANASTASIA:** Yeah! Yeah. You understand? I can't understand how it happened! Because, in one second she's turning my head, and I'm finding that she's putting her breast into my mouth. I'm lying there, and like, she's putting her breast into my mouth.

I'm paralyzed that moment. What is going on? And she's speaking something, it was something like, "Mother Mary was feeding Jesus." And I'm just paralyzed. And I don't know what to do because her breast in my mouth. Just — and it was awful. And I don't know how long it was going on, actually. It was like every — for me, everything stopped.

**ERIKA:** Then there was a noise from the staircase — someone walking near the chapel. The mistress quickly covered herself with her sari again.

Eli Anastasia didn't know what to make of what was happening. He had no words. He grew up sheltered — no talk of sexual abuse — and he says he never received any training from the Missionaries of Charity about sexual harassment or what constitutes inappropriate behavior.

Even though this was his superior, the direct voice of God, something felt incredibly wrong.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** How it is possible, something like that to happen? In front of the blessed sacrament! The holiest of holy!

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**ERIKA:** Stories about sexual abuse are often really hard to investigate, and it's even harder in a group like this that's closed to outsiders. So we partnered with an investigative reporting team, Type Investigations, and we worked with reporter Kathryn Joyce.

So Kathryn, you know, we don't know where sisters are stationed. In some cases, we might not even know if they're in the order anymore. We don't know their real or secular names and their mail is read by their superior, so if we send them a letter, it might not even get to them.

**KATHRYN JOYCE:** Yeah, I think that this was one of the things that was more challenging, about reporting this story than any other that I've done. It is such an insular group. There's a mother superior who, like, is ultimately making a decision about whether or not people can speak to us. And that insularity is so much more formalized than in a lot of other groups that I've looked at.

Um, over the past decade-plus, I've I've reported on this a number of times, sometimes looking at abuse in specific Catholic churches, sometimes looking at big fundamentalist or evangelical institutions, um, whether that's someplace like Bob Jones University or a very large overseas mission group that has a lot of members. So I've I've seen this sort of stuff in in different settings before, and I think that there are some similarities, but one thing that was pretty interesting in this case is that there was, uh, a substantial paper trail.

**ERIKA:** Yeah. I mean, we collected a lot of documents to vet this story, and Eli Anastasia isn't the only person with an allegation of sexual abuse in the MCs. We also spoke with another former sister named Bathilde, and we're going to get her story a little later.

**KATHRYN:** To confirm both stories, we reviewed legal documents, church investigation reports, emails from the MCs regarding their policies, plus we had dozens of letters that both Bathilde and Eli Anastasia had been sending back and forth with the MCs or other members of the Catholic hierarchy, other people in their lives, sort of testifying to what had happened to them.

**ERIKA:** We really did want to hear from the Missionaries of Charity on this. And we ... we wrote to them several times; we sent them a comprehensive list of questions. They didn't answer those questions, but we did get a statement from an MC spokesperson, who told us that the alleged abusers vehemently denied the allegations.

**KATHRYN:** Yeah, we we asked to speak to them directly.

**ERIKA:** Yeah.

**KATHRYN:** Um, but the MCs declined. That spokesperson also told us that the fact that Eli Anastasia and Bathilde quote, "believed they were abused is without question," but continued that "the evidence compiled in the investigations the Missionaries of Charity conducted contradicts their accusations."

**ERIKA:** They're basically saying that they investigated the abuse, and they say that the abuse did not happen.

**KATHRYN:** Yep.

**ERIKA:** You know, the other thing that stuck out to me in this response is the suggestion that these former sisters had mental health problems.

**KATHRYN:** Mhm.

**ERIKA:** They also emphasized that neither of them took vows, basically implying that they weren't real Missionaries of Charity sort of as a defense against these allegations.

**KATHRYN:** You know, there there is a long history of responding to rape allegations or abuse allegations by denigrating the mental health of the person who's making the accusation or de-legitimizing them in in one way or another, um.

**ERIKA:** Basically calling them crazy.

**KATHRYN:** Basically calling them crazy. You know, back during the Bill Clinton era, the defense that was commonly made against all of the women who came forward with allegations against President Clinton was referred to as "nuts and sluts," because women were just being constantly dismissed as either crazy or promiscuous. I mean, I just think that it is a it's a common thing.

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**ERIKA:** This praying together -- it became a nightly ritual. And Eli Anastasia says his mistress pushed things further.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** She was trying to put her hand where it should not be at all. Never, never, never. Because of the vow of chastity, first of all. Under my skirt. And I said, "Whoa, stop. What are you doing?"

**ERIKA:** The mistress pulled back her hand -- but kept moving her body against his.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** And it was just awful.

**ERIKA:** Eli Anastasia wanted to tell someone. He tried to describe this thing he didn't understand in confession. He says the priest dismissed him.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** "Child, your superior knows. I know her very well. She would not wish anything bad to you. She's your superior -- listen and do what she tells you."

**ERIKA:** Eli Anastasia thought maybe he could phone another priest he knew, but he had to ask his mistress for permission to use a pay phone in town. Then his mistress stood directly beside him while he made the call.

It seemed like there was no way to tell anyone. So Eli Anastasia says the abuse continued for months.

The type of abuse he alleges -- abuse by a nun -- it tends to fly under the radar in the Catholic Church. Partly because people don't expect women to be abusers.

**MARY DISPENZA:** This is a very unaddressed part of Catholic Church history.

**ERIKA:** Mary Dispenza used to be a nun. She now works with SNAP, the Survivors' Network for those Abused by Priests. She leads support groups for survivors. She's their point-person for abuse involving nuns.

**MARY DISPENZA:** I have probably heard from 120 or so survivors of nun abuse.

**ERIKA:** It wasn't until after she started leading support groups for survivors of nun abuse that she realized an incident from her own time as a nun had been sexual assault. That's how hard it can be to recognize nun abuse sometimes.

**MARY DISPENZA:** Religious orders are a little bit different from, let's say, the clergy, because you build up -- especially women religious -- you really become family. I often say religious abuse within orders, men and women, is very much like incest. So the tendency is even greater to keep quiet and silent, because you don't want to hurt your family.

**ERIKA:** And then there's the vow of obedience.

**TOM DOYLE:** They're afraid. Because they're taught if you ask questions, it's a sin. If you doubt anything, it's a sin.

**ERIKA:** This is Tom Doyle. He was a Catholic priest for forty years. In the 1980s, he became one of the first priests to draw attention to the clergy sex-abuse crisis. He wrote a 92-page report that urged the Church to take the problem seriously.

**TOM:** It was the end of my career in the Vatican as as a as a priest.

**ERIKA:** Almost 20 years later, the National Catholic Reporter wrote that his report had been prophetic. Today Doyle estimates his report has been cited in thousands of lawsuits, and he's become a global expert. He's worked on or consulted on more than a thousand clergy sex-abuse cases around the world.

He says the rigid hierarchy in conservative religious orders like the Missionaries of Charity can trap abuse victims.

**TOM:** The religious orders where the Mother General or the Mother Superior's word was considered to be the word of God, so that even if a -- they would tell you -- even if a superior gives you an order that is wrong, you have to obey it, because it's God's word. Now that is insanity.

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**ERIKA:** Eli Anastasia learned to follow the rule of obedience years before he ever came to India.

Back in 2008, six years before his time in Chinsurah, he was just starting out -- he was an MC pre-aspirant in Poland. One day he got news that his grandmother, who was like a mother to him, had died.

The mistress in Poland scolded him for crying. Eli Anastasia asked for permission to go home for the funeral, but the mistress said:

**ELI ANASTASIA:** "If you want to go to funeral somewhere else, pack your things and go away. And never come back again. Or shut up and go and smile to your sisters."

**ERIKA:** So basically either leave and go to the funeral, but never come back --

**ELI ANASTASIA:** Yeah.

**ERIKA:** Or stay, but stop crying, go smile and be a sister.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** Yeah, and it was just one or two hours after I got the phone call about this that all my heart was broken. "OK, Jesus. I choose you." And what I did, I cried for the last time, I went and I started to smile.

**ERIKA:** Eli Anastasia was eventually dismissed from the MC house in Poland. He told us he doesn't know why.

When we asked the Missionaries of Charity for comment, an authorized spokesperson claimed Eli Anastasia was dismissed because of his "personal conduct." The spokesperson said it included a claim that he put his hand on the throat of a fellow aspirant.

The spokesperson also alleges that Eli Anastasia's behavior follows a "pattern." That he quote "enthusiastically enters a Missionaries of Charity community, forms an unhealthy emotional

attachment with one of its members, is rebuffed by that individual, and then engages in highly inappropriate behavior, including threats of suicide, until asked to leave.”

Eli Anastasia says none of this is true.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** Making up rumors and gossips is the only strategy that the religious family could choose in this terrible situation, in spite of following the way of God, who is a friend of truth.

**ERIKA:** Eli Anastasia says he *wasn't* suicidal in Poland. He felt being in the MC house in Poland was one of the happiest times in his life. And not only did he never assault his fellow aspirant, but, he says, the reverse actually happened: a sister who Anastasia says was troubled had attacked him twice, ripping the buttons off his shirt. Plus, he says, that incident happened nearly a year before he was asked to go home. And he says during that time, his superior told him to start sewing his sari — to get ready to move to the next stage.

After he left Poland, Eli Anastasia returned home to Russia. He volunteered with the MCs in Moscow. And then he got a second chance to join the Missionaries of Charity. He could start again in India. It felt like a miracle.

So when his mistress in India invited him to these night adorations, he worried that if he disobeyed, he'd be sent away again.

He says the abuse began in the chapel, but then spread to other parts of the house. In particular, "Mother's room" — the room in the house where Mother Teresa used to stay.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** This is the room of abuse.

**ERIKA:** It wasn't separated by a wall -- just a bamboo screen and a curtain instead of a door.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** Just every day, the same story. She was coming in the Mother's room around 11 o'clock. And she was taking off my clothes. She was taking off her clothes. She was lying in the bed. She was putting me on her, on the top, like trying to put breast on breast. And just making the movements in order to get ...

**ERIKA:** Eli Anastasia loses his words here. But in a letter he sent the MCs in 2019, he wrote that his mistress quote "moved her body 'til she got pleasure."

**ELI ANASTASIA:** She was just constantly repeating about the sacrifice and "You're special one. You're my Jesus. I am Mary, you're like Jesus to me, you're like Jesus to me, you're like Jesus to me." Like she was whispering on my ear, "This is for the salvation of the world. This is for

those who are living in sin. This is for those who are not keeping chastity. This is not a sin. This is just a sacrifice."

**ERIKA:** One time, Eli Anastasia says he traveled with his mistress to Kolkata. While they were there, the mistress pointed out another nun. She said that sister betrayed her.

The mistress told Eli Anastasia, "I was a mother to her. She was my daughter. Like you. She was like my Jesus."

Eli Anastasia thought to himself, "This is my mistress admitting she's done this before."

The mistress then turned to Eli Anastasia and said:

**ELI ANASTASIA:** "Will you betray me? Are you going to be my Judas?"

### **MIDROLL**

**ERIKA:** For decades, the news has been full of stories of sexual abuse scandals in the Catholic Church. They started coming to light while Mother Teresa was still alive -- and came close to home.

**TERRY MCKIERNAN:** I don't know how much you know about Don McGuire, but he was a serial abuser of boys.

**ERIKA:** Terry McKiernan is the founder of Bishop Accountability, an organization that documents abuse in the Catholic Church. He's referring to Donald McGuire, formerly Father Donald McGuire, a Jesuit priest defrocked in 2008. Donald McGuire was one of many priests who went to prison for sexually abusing boys, and one of the most prominent. He was a conservative and inspiring priest with powerful friends.

**TERRY:** His MO was that he targeted wealthy, right-wing Catholic families. And once he ingratiated himself into that family and began siphoning off funds, he would also convince them to allow their 12- or 13-year-old son to accompany him as his secretary. During these trips, which were, you know, basically he was always on the road, he would sexually assault the boy who had been picked to be his, um, his secretary.

**ERIKA:** In 1983, McGuire became the spiritual director of the Missionaries of Charity. He traveled the world to MC homes to hear confessions from MC sisters, and he held dozens of retreats for the order. Mother Teresa also met alone with him for confession and spiritual advice.

You've actually heard about Donald McGuire before. He was the priest who warned Joan Wurster not to leave the MCs, or she'd get divorced and have children with disabilities.

In the 1990s, McGuire was removed from his position in the Church because of abuse allegations. The San Francisco Weekly published a letter that appeared to be written by Mother Teresa, though it wasn't signed. In it, she worried about the reputation of the priesthood. She said she trusted McGuire. And she wished to quote "see his vital ministry resume as soon as possible."

McGuire did return, and allegations soon emerged that his abuse continued.

In an emailed statement, the MCs' spokesperson said they didn't believe Mother Teresa personally wrote the letter supporting McGuire, and that McGuire had deceived Mother Teresa and betrayed her trust.

In 2003, Donald McGuire went to trial for abuse. Mother Teresa's successor, Sister Nirmala Joshi, sent a letter to the judge defending his character.

**TERRY:** The sisters, in their very distinctive garb, attended the trial to support him. There are pictures of this.

**ERIKA:** In the courthouse, the sisters wore buttons on their saris that read, "I support Father McGuire."

**TERRY:** The sisters were very, very present at that trial.

**ERIKA:** In the end, he was convicted and sent to prison for 25 years.

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**ERIKA:** What happened with Father McGuire and the MCs, it gives me a sense of how the congregation responds to sexual abuse -- from the top down. And that's what I think this episode is about: not just how a culture can enable abuse, but also how a system works when abuse comes to light.

It makes me think of a story Mary Johnson told me.

You've heard from Mary Johnson throughout this series. One time she told me something that caught my attention — a story that seemed to shed light on the culture of the congregation when it comes to sexual assault.

**MARY JOHNSON:** There was one time, there was a sister, she was very upset about something.

**ERIKA:** Mary had a lot of responsibility -- she traveled with Mother Teresa, she prepared sisters for final vows. Basically upper management, she says.

She told me at one point that she learned about something that happened to several sisters in Europe.

**MARY JOHNSON:** There was a terrible thing that happened, um, in a convent, in a remote location. And one night, men broke into the convent and they raped the sisters. And it was a really horrible thing.

**ERIKA:** Mary says this story was somewhat common knowledge among sisters with authority. She heard about it from several nuns, including one who was there that night.

Another former sister told us she'd heard about the same attack -- also directly from a sister who'd been there. She said it was whispered about in Kolkata but considered "top secret."

In Mary Johnson's case, she says she helped one of the nuns from that convent prepare for final vows. The sister told Mary that the victims talked to Mother Teresa about the attack.

**MARY JOHNSON:** And Mother told them, "Now you have told Mother, you must never tell anyone else again. You must never speak of it." And obviously this is not going to be helpful to those sisters. Those sisters had had this very traumatic experience. You don't heal from trauma by ignoring it.

**ERIKA:** Why do you think Mother Teresa said that to them — to not speak of it ever again?

**MARY JOHNSON:** She would often say that for various things, like, "OK, you've told Mother, now never speak of it again" for various things. For Mother, speaking about bad things that had happened was almost as bad or even worse than the fact that the thing had happened.

**ERIKA:** Mary says Mother Teresa just didn't understand how trauma worked. That hiding something could make it worse.

And that brings us to Bathilde. Bathilde asked us not to use her last name. She's 62 years old and lives in Paris, and she was once a sister with the Missionaries of Charity.

**BATHILDE:** The first letter?

Over the past 18 years, she's written a lot of letters. They describe abuse she says she experienced in the order — letters to the head of the Missionaries of Charity, letters to the Vatican.

**BATHILDE:** Yes, I have it in front of me.

**ERIKA:** The first letter, in 2003, was to a sister we're not naming: her alleged abuser.

**BATHILDE (reading letter):** "I think you remember me. I was your postulant in Rome in San Gregorio around the year 1987. The one that you have sexually abused."

**ERIKA:** It was in that convent in San Gregorio that she met the sister who she says sexually abused her: her mistress.

Bathilde says, at first, the mistress just directed her as she would any postulant. But a few weeks in, her mistress told her she loved her. Then things became physical.

**BATHILDE:** After night prayer, she would say, "Come," and then sitting in the bench and, uh, she would kiss me and, uh, I mean, uh, I don't like to say it ... she would, uh, (sighs) I mean, she would kiss me. She would pet my breast, she would tell me, "One day I will take your your clothes all out, and I will kiss you everywhere." But she only say, she did not do. I knew that every day it would happen. That's all I knew.

**ERIKA:** Bathilde did what she could to avoid her, but that angered her mistress.

**BATHILDE:** "You have to, you have to obey me. You are very disobedient."

**ERIKA:** In time, she says, the abuse became more forceful.

**BATHILDE:** She would take me ... to that big corridor, and she would push me against the wall, or walking in front of me then turn suddenly, and taking me into her arms. And, uh, I mean, I could not uh I could not escape. I mean, I did not know what to do.

**ERIKA:** Bathilde says she didn't dare tell the regional superior; she'd just yell at her. She told multiple priests, but says they were no help, that they pretended not to hear her and changed the subject. She says Mother Teresa once asked her if someone was bothering her, but that she said nothing for fear of being scolded.

Bathilde outwardly changed during this time. She remembers the regional superior reprimanded her.

**BATHILDE:** "Why are you not smiling? You never smile." You know? I mean, I could not smile. I was, uh, it was difficult.

**ERIKA:** Eventually, she gave up. She felt empty.

**BATHILDE:** Just let her do, and I did not defend myself.

**ERIKA:** Bathilde graduated out of postulancy and was transferred to Poland. The abuse was over; it was a relief. So much so, she remarked one day how nice it was to be there and according to Bathilde, the superior overheard and asked what she meant. She started to tell her story and the superior stopped her. “You don’t need to go any further,” she said. “I know who it is.” She named Bathilde’s mistress and said she did the same to another sister.

Bathilde’s superior urged her to repeat the story to the regional superior, so she did, but she says the regional reacted with disdain. She told Bathilde, “I knew you were a kind of sister like *that*.”

Years later, when Bathilde confronted the order with her allegations, both the superior and the regional superior said they didn’t recall those conversations.

When the time came, Bathilde was not permitted to take her vows. She says she wasn’t told why. Instead, she was abruptly sent home.

After two years, she asked to re-join the MCs. She was accepted into the contemplative branch. Contemplative days were quiet, filled with prayer. But in that silence, she started having flashbacks and trouble sleeping. She says she reached out to Sister Nirmala Joshi, the founder of the contemplative branch. She told Sr. Nirmala about the abuse. In response, Bathilde says, Sr. Nirmala encouraged her to see a psychologist. And one more thing:

**BATHILDE:** She told me, “You don’t speak to anybody of what happened. You speak to nobody — absolutely nobody.” So, I mean, that’s the thing that I had to do. I did not speak to anybody. And then I was having very much pain in the stomach. That was not a good thing to say, not to speak to anybody.

**ERIKA:** In time, Bathilde was sent home again -- dismissed from the MCs. And again, it wasn’t clear why — just a vague suggestion that she wasn’t obedient enough. They dropped her off at the airport with \$400 dollars and a miraculous medal -- one of those tokens Mother Teresa used to give out.

Bathilde went home to Paris. Years passed. That brings us back to the letter writing.

Around 2003, Bathilde read in the newspaper about the global sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church. She was still haunted by her own experience. She decided to write a letter. She thought, “Maybe an acknowledgement or an apology will help me heal.”

**BATHILDE:** And I will feel much better. And I would feel alright. I mean, all my life is ruined for me, all my life, she damaged everything.

**ERIKA:** So she wrote to her former mistress.

**BATHILDE (reading letter):** “You made my life very difficult. It was very difficult to pray because of flashback coming in my head, lack of trust, pain in the stomach and lack of trust toward the superiors. How do you repair all that?”

**ERIKA:** She also sent a copy to Sr. Nirmala -- the sister who'd sent her to a psychologist and told her never to speak of it. By now, Sr. Nirmala was actually the Superior General -- Mother Teresa's successor to lead the MCs.

A couple of weeks later, Bathilde heard back from her former mistress. She flatly denied the allegations. "I have done nothing to bring upon me such an accusation." she wrote. Then she ended the letter, "I am praying for you and asking the lord to forgive you."

**BATHILDE:** I felt very very bad, that letter. Very bad.

**ERIKA:** She also received a response from Sister Nirmala, the head of the MCs at the time.

**BATHILDE (reading letter):** “Dear Bathilde, thank you for the copy of your letter to Sr. [BLEEP] dated 4th November, 2003, accusing her of sexually abusing you when you were a postulant. I was deeply pained when I read it.”

**ERIKA:** In the letter, Sister Nirmala said she spoke to the alleged abuser and that quote, "The mature way in which she responded to such a painful situation leaves me no room to doubt her sincerity."

Then Sr. Nirmala addressed Bathilde herself.

**BATHILDE (reading letter):** “I wonder what made you write such a letter? Is it really true, or is it because you are so hurt in life that you can't help hurting others also? Whatever it may be, I asked Jesus to take away all the burden of pain you carry in your heart, and fill it with his own love, so that you may be able to forgive all who have hurt you and ask pardon of all of whom you have hurt. And ask our Lady and our mother ...”

**ERIKA:** To Bathilde, the message was clear: *She* was the one causing problems. Case closed. No follow-up. No investigation. No apology.

**BATHILDE (reading letter):** “... and for all our sisters. With much love and prayer, God bless you, Sister Nirmala, MC”

**ERIKA:** This did not deter Bathilde. She wrote Sister Nirmala back the next month, in December 2003 — no response. Again in June 2004 — no response. In November 2004, she wrote again,

“Please, sister, do not put down a sister who has suffered from sexual harassment, otherwise you victimize her a second time.” More silence.

Finally, Sr. Nirmala responded. It was late January 2005. Sr. Nirmala wrote, “We want to know the truth. Truth must prevail.”

She said the MCs had a policy and procedure to follow and were starting an investigation. She also said Bathilde should send any evidence she had to prove her accusations.

Bathilde went into overdrive. She gathered letters from family members and her old psychologist. Her sister wrote that, after leaving the MCs, Bathilde suffered from flashbacks and her face was dull.

Bathilde mailed it all to the Missionaries of Charity.

The MCs said they would contact Bathilde quote “at the appropriate time.” But Bathilde says she was never told what was involved or who was being talked to for the investigation. She received no follow-up questions. Nothing.

Frustrated, she wrote to officials in the Catholic hierarchy. They offered Bathilde empathy, but little else.

Eventually, a year and a half later, in 2006, the Church sent Bathilde a response. It says quote, “It appears that material evidence, which could support your accusations against the sister beyond any doubt, is missing. Actually, there is only one testimony — yours — against the sister’s word.”

Again, case-closed. To this day, Bathilde says she’s never seen any official report or other documentation of the investigation. And to this day, she says what her mistress did affects her.

**BATHILDE:** Prayer is difficult to pray and, uh, but I do, I do. I feel hard in everything. I feel like if uh ... like if I don't exist. It's like a big infinite devastation of the being. Me, I want the truth. That's all. And I, I'm not getting it.

**ERIKA:** In 2017, Bathilde renewed her letter-writing campaign. She wrote to Pope Francis, who'd said sympathetic things about victims. She didn't hear back from him. She heard from the Vatican's office on religious orders. They brushed off her accusations. And eventually, they warned that if she continued to say the Church had treated her unfairly, she could face legal action for slander.

## MIDROLL

**ERIKA:** Eli Anastasia couldn't sleep. Or really, his mistress wouldn't let him sleep. It was 2014 in the convent in Chinsurah, India. He uses he/him pronouns now. He says his mistress abused him almost every night for months. She kept him up until an hour or two before the morning bell.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** I was a zombie. I don't did not understand what I'm doing. I could not really really even separate the reality and not reality, because you're sleeping, you're not sleeping. It was just one day, which is not finishing.

**ERIKA:** One night, Eli Anastasia and his mistress heard a sound: Somebody nearby used the bathroom and then left quickly. Eli Anastasia figured the sister must have overheard them.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** For sure, everybody heard it. It is just not possible not to hear.

**ERIKA:** Then, out of the blue, a senior sister from MC headquarters visited the house. She interviewed Eli Anastasia's fellow postulant for an entire day.

Soon after Eli Anastasia says he was abruptly summoned to Kolkata by Sister Ansi -- the head of the MCs' contemplative branch.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** And she said, "I want to talk to you. We'll have a conversation, please come on Wednesday. But, by the way, can you pick up all your clothes and things?"

**ERIKA:** Eli Anastasia's mistress was summoned, too.

When they arrived, Sister Ansi spoke to the mistress first. They talked for over an hour. Then it was Eli Anastasia's turn.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** I said, "Hello, sister." And she's starting to shout at me. "*You have to go from here!*" "Wait a minute, sister. I can't understand what is going on. Like I'm living there in Chinsurah. I cannot understand what is happening. Like, what is the reason you called me? Can you explain to me what you want from me?"

**ERIKA:** Eli Anastasia was being sent away. Not just from Chinsurah, not just from India, but, he would find out later, from the Missionaries of Charity. And he didn't know why.

In an email to us, the MC spokesperson suggested that Eli Anastasia was dismissed because of his "personal conduct." The spokesperson implied he had become fixated on a fellow sister and acted inappropriately.

Eli Anastasia says no one said anything like this to him.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** It was no, nothing. Eh? No breaking of the rules, nothing, nothing, nothing.

**ERIKA:** He says he asked again and again why he was being sent away. Finally, he says Sister Ansi told him that since Eli Anastasia was Russian and Vladimir Putin had invaded Ukraine, his presence might cause problems for the sisters in Chinsurah.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** I can't understand really what is, what is the reason? Because what I have to do with Putin?

**ERIKA:** As far as he knew, no sister had ever been sent away from the MCs for something like this. After all, once you're called, you're called for life.

He was given a plane ticket home to Russia.

As for his mistress, Eli Anastasia says she also got a ticket. She was transferred to another MC branch -- in Nepal.

\* \* \*

**ERIKA:** Once he was back in Russia, Eli Anastasia fell into a deep depression. A friend he stayed with had to force him to eat.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** I was just a vegetable. Out of reality fully. No desires, nothing, nothing.

**ERIKA:** He didn't have the language to explain what happened to him. For a few months, he was suicidal.

One day he spent a long time alone in a chapel in front of the altar, pleading with God.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** So the question to God, "*Why?* If you gave me this vocation to be a nun, why it had happened? How you *allowed* to do that? How you, how I should *live* with that? Where is the way? You called me! And what shall I do now with all that? I cannot even understand what is going on." Crying and shouting at Jesus. And crying and shouting still.

**ERIKA:** Eventually, Eli Anastasia met other people who had suffered traumatic experiences. They gave him the words he needed: Sexual abuse. PTSD.

Over time, he thought, "Maybe there are other victims in the Missionaries of Charity. And if I couldn't name what happened, how could they?"

In 2019, five years after he was forced from the order, Eli Anastasia wrote a letter:

**ELI ANASTASIA:** “Dear sisters, this letter is written in fulfillment of the instruction of my spiritual father. And it is addressed to Reverent Sister Prema as the head of the Society of the Missionaries of Charity. The main topic of this letter is sexual and spiritual abuse.”

**ERIKA:** Eli Anastasia laid out what had happened to him.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** I wanted to have a dialogue with the society first, just to share my story. Because my main aim: to change the neglect.

**ERIKA:** Three months later, he got a phone call. It was Sr. Prema, the head of the MCs. She asked Eli Anastasia, what exactly did he want them to do for him?

So Eli Anastasia wrote a list of systemic changes: Provide education and training on sexual violence. Support past victims with psychological care. Financially compensate sisters who leave their vocation, especially sisters from underdeveloped countries. Offer rehabilitation for perpetrators, and prevent them from serving in positions of power.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** I was asking, also, Sister Prema to appoint a proper person to whom any sisters, anyone in the society, can freely, without permission, without asking permission for a phone call, can turn and to report.

**ERIKA:** In response, the MCs commissioned a canon lawyer to look at the case. A canon lawyer is someone accredited to work within the Catholic Church’s internal legal system.

**HELEN COSTIGANE:** My name is Helen Costigane. Um, I’m a member of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. I live in Hammersmith in London, and I teach moral theology and canon law at St. Mary’s University in Twickenham.

**ERIKA:** Helen Costigane’s job was to investigate the claims of abuse. But she told us she wasn’t actually able to conduct a full investigation. The sisters were too hard to reach -- often in remote locations with bad connections and no computers.

But Helen Costigane wrote a report.

The spokesperson for the Missionaries of Charity said in an email to us that Costigane’s report concluded there was quote “no concrete evidence to support the allegations.” She did say that, but it’s not all she said.

**HELEN:** I said, there is no evidence to support the allegations, but that’s not to say that it didn’t happen.

**ERIKA:** Like Eli Anastasia, she told the MCs they should make changes: provide training in maintaining proper boundaries, create an external channel to report abuse, and psychologically assess sisters when they enter.

She said the MCs should look at Pope Francis's new guidelines on sexual abuse, which expressly forbid retaliation against victims.

**HELEN:** That's something Pope Francis has said: "You have to listen to the victims." That's important.

**ERIKA:** Costigane asked Eli Anastasia to total his expenses related to his trauma, and she told the MCs to follow up about compensation. Finally, she asked the MCs to give Eli Anastasia a copy of the official report.

But the Missionaries of Charity didn't do that. Instead, in February 2020, they sent Eli Anastasia a letter. It insinuated that his allegations were just a ruse for money. That Eli Anastasia should quote "be careful." And then they wrote this: "What you have written could be considered blackmail. We would not want to jeopardize your situation or create unnecessary liability issues."

**ELI ANASTASIA:** She's just threatening me with the blackmail. If I would not have such a support like now, on that letter. I don't know. I would be suicidal!

**ERIKA:** Costigane was concerned enough that she responded to the MCs directly, writing:

**HELEN:** "'I was appalled by the tone and content is putting it mildly.' Because I have to say, oh that's ... that's really, you know, that's not helping, in a sense."

**ERIKA:** After Costigane's letter, the MCs did send Eli Anastasia the report, but now he worried he could be at legal risk, so he looked for a lawyer.

He found his way to Tom Doyle, the former priest we heard from earlier who's worked on more than a thousand clergy sex abuse cases. He's also a canon lawyer. He consulted pro-bono on Eli Anastasia's case for a few months in 2020 and 2021.

This spring, they parted ways after a disagreement about a partnering legal group. But Doyle says he still believes Eli Anastasia's allegations and supports the case.

Eli Anastasia hopes to continue his case. Not a criminal complaint to press charges, or a civil complaint, for compensation. He wants to enter a canon law process with the Vatican. He wants to convince the Church to investigate abuse and neglect in the Missionaries of Charity. He hopes to start a class-action complaint for people who have suffered similar abuse or neglect from the MCs.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** And still, I have nothing against the sisters itself. I have nothing against the church itself. Still today have wonderful sisters who are really living their vocation as they can

and trying to do the best they can. I'm against the *system*. We should embrace our faults. To change, to take responsibility for an action.

**ERIKA:** You know it's interesting to me, hearing you say that, because it's bringing to my mind that speaking your faults and acknowledging your failure is such a big part of being a Missionary of Charity. And so, in a sense, what you're asking for is actually very central to the mission —

**ELI ANASTASIA:** Yeah.

**ERIKA:** Which is to acknowledge sin or acknowledge faults and making amends in some ways, and that's what you want.

**ELI ANASTASIA:** Yeah.

Today, the Missionaries of Charity, they are really witnesses of silence — to cover up, to hide, to silence others. It is not a silence in which God lives; it is completely opposite.

God is not a friend of covering up the oppression; God is a friend of truth. “Preach the truth as if you had a million voices. It is silence that kills the world.”

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## CREDITS

**ERIKA:** This episode was reported in partnership with [Type Investigations](#). You can find out more at [typeinvestigations.org](http://typeinvestigations.org). Special thanks to reporter Kathryn Joyce, editor Sasha Belenky, fact-checker Nandini Rathi and editor Sarah Blustain.

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I'm Erika Lantz. Thanks for listening.