



Press release of the 27th June, 2023

Release of the Report "To Understand and to Heal"

In October 2019, the General Chapter of the Brothers of Saint John asked the Prior General to set up an interdisciplinary commission with the mission to establish what links exist between the high number of instances of sexual abuse committed by members of the Family of Saint John and the personal and family history of Father Marie-Dominique Philippe OP (1912-2006), their founder. Today, after more than three years of work, the Commission submitted its report. Entitled "To Understand and To Heal – Origins and Analyses of the Abuse within the Family of Saint John", the report totals 800 pages. The Brothers of Saint John is making it public, conscious of the gravity of the deeds it details and their dramatic consequences.

To Understand

After the revelations made by the Prior General, in 2013, of the abuse committed by Father M.-D. Philippe, a significant number of testimonies and complaints about abuse committed by Brothers have, in addition, come to light over the years. Besides the heinous cases of sexual abuse of minors, the high number of instances of sexual abuse, accompanied by justifications, towards adults, has led the Family of Saint John to a growing awareness that it was facing a grave and specific problem.

Through a thorough historical account of that problem, the Commission wanted to report on what had happened before and after the foundation of the Family of Saint John. This was necessary in order to then make a diagnosis about the roots of the abuse, with the help in particular of contributions coming from the disciplines of theology and psychology.

Through its work, the Commission aims to make a substantial contribution to preventing the recurrence of abuse, an objective to which the community was duty bound and which was also a legitimate demand of the victims. This involved acknowledging the abuse and the processes that led to them. It then contributes to the work undertaken several years ago by the Brothers and Sisters of Saint John to eliminate the abuse and reform whatever stands in need of reform.

An Interdisciplinary Work

The work of the Commission was carried out according to three approaches:

- An historical approach relating to the abuse committed by the founder and members of the Family of Saint John;
- A theological approach to identify the justifications invoked and analyze what roots these may have had within the formation received;
- A psychological and systemic approach to understand not only the ascendancy and abuse mechanisms, but also the community dysfunctions which enabled this behavior.

Following the request made by the General Chapter for expert involvement, the Commission worked as a mixed group. On the one hand, external experts - historians, theologians, psychiatrists and psychologists - contributed their analyses so as to form the interdisciplinary matrix needed to ensure the perspective and rigor called for by an investigation of this kind. On the other, Brothers and Sisters of Saint John contributed their own resources and knowledge as members of the Family of Saint John, having lived within it for many years. Their involvement in the work of the Commission is a conscious choice, expressive of the will of the Family of St John to get to the truth and to undertake reform.

What the Report Reveals

The facts described in the report are grave and shocking. Since 1975, the year of the foundation of the Community of Saint John, 72 Brothers have committed sexual abuse (8% out of a total of 871 brothers) and 167 victims of Brothers have been counted.

The majority of the facts were committed by Priest Brothers in the context of spiritual accompanying of adult women. The term “sexual abuse” covers, here and in the report, facts of different natures, from verbal solicitation to rape.

The work of the Commission confirms that sexual abuse was committed by Father M.-D. Philippe on adults – especially religious sisters – before and after 1975 and that his role is a determining factor in the propagation of abuse within the Family of Saint John.

It sheds light on the origins and causes of the abuse, the justifications that were used and the way this abuse has increased. Amongst the causes, the following can be particularly mentioned:

- A long-standing history of deviance present in the Dehau-Philippe family.
- A self-referentiality of Father M.-D. Philippe, which was carried over into the Family of St John by means of the brothers' attitude towards his person and his teaching.
- An intellectual and spiritual formation given by the founder which, while orthodox for the most part, contains deficiencies and mistakes that blurred some fundamental moral guidelines.
- Erroneous beliefs, especially about spiritual fatherhood which, in some cases, led to ascendancy rather than fostering spiritual freedom.
- A recourse, in private contexts, to notions such as friendship, mercy, union to God, etc. to justify abusive behavior.

It is with the victims ever in the forefront of their minds, and with the concern moreover for generations to come, that the Commission and its different contributors have sought to understand how such a catastrophe could have taken place.

The report does not claim to give the final word on the abuse within the Family of Saint John. It is a particular contribution, realized within a specific setting, and is bound to be limited. It is part of a wider field of study and needs to be supplemented by further research. The last twenty years have shown that any

extensive work on the question of abuse can only contribute to combatting this plague within the Church and society.

To Heal

The courageous speaking up by persons who have suffered sexual abuse by Father M.-D. Philippe and by some Brothers, has allowed the Family of Saint John to embark on a path of truth and healing.

For ten years, the community of Brothers have called into question what they had received from their founder, initiated reforms of their formation and established procedures to receive and to respond to complaints or testimonies with justice. In 2015, the SOS Abuse Commission was created. This Commission was tasked with listening to the victims of abuse committed by Brothers and to give advice on courses of action, in accordance with civil and ecclesiastical laws, so that the guilty may be punished. The first activity report of this commission, handed over in 2019, contributed to reinforce the distancing from the founder and to consolidate the dynamic of transformation and cleansing, so that inadmissible and death-dealing behavior might be brought to an end.

In 2022 and following on from the two communities of Sisters of the Family of Saint John, the General Chapter of the Brothers took the decision to no longer refer to the Rule of Life written by Father M.-D. Philippe and approved a declaration on the charism defining the life of the Brothers of Saint John independently from any reference to their founder. The same year, a new decentralized organization of governance was set up through the creation of provinces and the *Ratio formationis*, a programmatic document on the initial and on-going formation of brothers, was promulgated. These two reforms, among others, were the result of several years' work and had mobilized a large number of brothers.

The work of the Interdisciplinary Commission, is a key part of this process of truth, reform and healing, a process which must continue.

By this report, the brothers seek to:

- Do justice to the victims, by providing more insight into the terrible damage they have suffered,
- Put an end to a deviance spread over so many years, so that others are not deceived and betrayed in their trust by manipulations of the Gospel,
- Understand what happened among them, in order to renew their congregation in its true vocation, at the service of the Gospel and the Church.

On the occasion of the release of the report "*To Understand and To Heal*", Brother François-Xavier Cazali, Prior General, declares: "*Today, in order that misdemeanors do not happen again, and to give consistency to our apology to the victims, which we renew, it is time to try to write the painful account of the facts and deeply study their roots. The history of the Brothers of Saint John cannot be defined by the dark history of sexual abuse. It is also in view of the journey made in the footsteps of Christ and of the vocation we have received from Him that the community has undertaken this work of truth and now wishes to learn from it.*"

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