



Who we are, why we exist and what we do.

L'AVREF is a victim-support organisation,

based in France, for people who have been abused in religious congregations, communities or movements. Staffed by volunteers, we were established under French law as a charitable association in 1998.

We are independent in that we are not affiliated to, and we do not receive grants from, any organisation. Our income comes from annual membership subscriptions and donations from the public.

How L'AVREF started

In 1998, a number of parents whose sons and daughters had joined certain Catholic communities, became alarmed by the deterioration of their physical and mental health. Initially, these parents believed that they were dealing with exceptional, isolated incidents but gradually they realised that patterns of psychological, sexual and spiritual abuse were present in many religious movements and communities, not only in France but throughout the world.

Determined to help those suffering, both the victims and their families, these parents joined together and formed L'AVREF. Since then, these founder-members have been joined by abuse-survivors, friends and other well-wishers, combining their efforts to support victims and eradicate abuse.

During the following years we began to understand that practically any activity in the contemplative, apostolic or the pastoral spheres of ministry, could be used by individuals, not for any benefit to the faithful, but for their own personal satisfaction. Group events such as retreats and celebrations, youth clubs and spiritual guidance had become opportunities for perverted clerics to identify and to select minors and vulnerable adults in order to establish coercive, interpersonal relationships for their own gratification. Lay teachers in Catholic schools and church choirmasters had been sexually abusing children and adolescents. Superiors in monasteries and convents were abusing their authority in order to humiliate and manipulate monks and nuns.

Examples of abuse:

- We learnt of naïve, reckless priests recommending psychologically fragile parishioners to attend “retreats” in communities where they pay pseudo-therapists to “help them discover their repressed memories.” Returning to their parishes they nearly all had “new memories” of childhood abuse by their paedophile parents,
- We learnt of deviant religious congregations duping young women into joining religious movements as postulants, pronouncing vows of obedience, then bringing them to France to work, for years, with little or no pay, in hotels and restaurants in France’s prestigious pilgrimage centres,
- We discovered perverted authoritarian priests running communities founded on mystico-sexual doctrines, sexually abusing their victims, “in order to relive the love of Jesus for his mother Mary”,
- We discovered ‘entryism’ practised by powerful, international movements, recruiting bishops and businessmen, infiltrating parishes, schools, universities and seminaries, ingratiating themselves with the Vatican with colossal donations, furthering their agenda.
- We learnt of religious communities where founders and superiors misused their authority so as to humiliate and control community members, for sexual gratification, financial extortion or simply for the pleasure of psychological manipulation and domination.

L'AVREF has repeatedly alerted the church hierarchy, bishops, abbots, priors, ...

for more than 20 years now, to credible, documented cases concerning deviant behaviour and abuse, deep-rooted in certain religious groups. More often than not our warnings have been met with silence, cover-ups, condescending reassurances and denials. Clerical privilege, impunity, secrecy and lies combined to ensure a free rein for predator priests, monks and nuns, in communities imposing humility and obedience. After years of efforts to alert church authorities L'AVREF was forced to conclude that corporate clericalism, and protection of the church's reputation and revenues, systematically prevailed over any real determination to provide restorative justice to abuse victims. Church hierarchy proved itself not only incapable of empathy, but oblivious to the fundamental human rights of the abused, and lacking any resolve to change that *status quo*.

Similarly, the state legal system proved inefficient

as an avenue for restorative justice. Statutes of limitations prevented many cases from coming to court. For those that did reach the courts, convictions were rare because of the extreme difficulty of proving the use of psychological constraint when the defence argues that the reported sexual activity was “consensual”.

So, while both church and state theoretically provided procedures for revealing the truth and dispensing justice, it became obvious to abuse victims and to L'AVREF that neither, in reality, provided any real benefit or protection to victims, past, present or future.

Throughout these years, bishops throughout France

were confronted with secularisation: dwindling church attendance, empty convents and monasteries, a slump in vocations, budget deficits and a rising indifference to the affairs of the church. Older charismatic communities, founded during the renewal of the seventies, as well as new communities in France and zealous missionaries from abroad, all strove to find new ideas that would halt the membership haemorrhage. Other established congregations followed suit, discovering that too they would have to either keep pace or disappear.

Influence and coercion

Tech-savvy monks and growth mangers were charged with reversing the trends of drooping attendance and membership. Focussing mainly on adolescents and young adults, they turned to the internet as the obvious means of mass communication. YouTube and Facebook, blogs and newsletters... were all affordable, efficient methods for generating buzz and influence, for personal communications with adolescents and for pulling in crowds to all sorts of events: “Concerts for God”, retreats, recollections, ski-camps, prayer-meetings, courses in philosophy, cures for homosexuality...

Some of the efforts deployed to inject new dynamism into the church played into the hands of those exploiting apostolic outreach for their personal benefit.

Individuals and communities within the church, desperate to appear attractive, redesigned their websites to comply with popular demand. Surfing the wave of self-improvement and “wellness”, untrained, immature clerics rebranded themselves as counsellors and therapists. Incompetent monks became self-professed marriage counsellors. Invitations to prayer meetings, with charismatic discernments and healings, popped up in parish newsletters and websites all over the country.

Predictably, emotionalist proselytism, cloned from American Pentecostals, increased attendance at services and vigils, conferences and seminars. Idealistic, naïve Catholics soon found themselves singing and dancing in the pews and parish halls, giving thanks, praising the Lord, taking leave of their senses – a step away from entrapment.

Predictably, the disheartened bishops, blinded by joy and the surge in attendance, rejoiced and danced and applauded too. They promoted and blessed these initiatives, ignorant of, or in some cases simply denying, the personality cults, the brainwashing and charlatanism that permeated the resurgence and continues today.

Predictable too was the increase in calls on our helpline.

For many years, despite our efforts, that was the *status quo*.

The church was preoccupied with allegations – and thousands of proven cases – of clerical paedophilia. Adult victims who dared to speak out and accuse the clergy of abuse were treated as ungrateful, vengeful misfits, disrespectful attention-seekers, misinterpreting paternal priestly affection for sexual advances. Bishops and community leaders reprimanded and insulted anxious parents, coaxed and ordered victims not to bring the Church's good name into disrepute, to remain silent, as if the truth were some shameful disease. For many victims, abandoned, and sometimes accused, by those whose duty it was to defend them, this silence was insufferable. Realising that abusers, and their disciples, were continuously searching for new victims to deceive and to rape, realising that all efforts to alert the authorities had proven fruitless, they decided to make their case public. They contacted L'AVREF and it was decided to publish their testimonies on our website.

A breach had been opened in the wall of silence.

Abuse victims then appeared in television interviews, social media and newspapers... Books were published describing abuse in different communities and movements. Investigative journalists published documentaries revealing pervasive sexual abuse in certain religious congregations. These revelations would never have been published ten or twenty years earlier when clerical abuse was unmentionable or simply inconceivable.

We are pleased to observe

that a number of communities are taking serious steps to instigate reform. They are certainly not the majority and their reform process will be long and difficult but they have shown that change and progress are possible. They have formed commissions, composed of community members, but also including lawyers and theologians, to investigate complaints, and take appropriate measures.

They have removed from their training syllabus their absurd distortions of scripture and dogma that they have used to justify and perpetuate abuse. They have expelled or suspended a number of their members while others are receiving mandatory counselling. They have referred all complaints of abuse to the state prosecutor's office. Recruitment, vetting and education are all under review. We also note that other movements and communities have created commissions which are worse than smokescreens. They are designed to deceive and reassure parents, to complicate and ultimately frustrate their enquiries, to appease church authorities, the public and the press.

L'AVREF therefore continues to publish victim statements and other information

so as to inform the public of the malicious behaviour of certain persons in certain groups. While it would be certainly wrong to label all communities as deviant and suppose that all monks, nuns and clerics are dangerous predators, L'AVREF continues to denounce the fact that certain communities and bishops allow known, recidivist, abusive clerics to operate in parishes or communities where they are in constant proximity to unsuspecting children, adolescents and adults.

Prevention

Predators have become skilled in organising double-purpose events: prayer meetings, Youth Festivals, weekend seminars for fiancés... which, on one hand, visibly fulfil their declared pastoral mission and, on the other, provide a constant flow of new candidates for abuse. Their arguments and techniques are devious, but detectable and avoidable if the candidates have been forewarned. Victim-testimonies in our possession clearly show that people of all ages and backgrounds need to develop prudence and scepticism and learn to recognise the vocabulary and behaviour patterns of clerical seduction, recruitment, grooming and abuse.

Our services

L'AVREF does not provide psychological or legal services, but our experience allows us to provide basic advice on access to such services. We are also able to advise on formulating and transmitting complaints to superiors, to church abuse-commissions, to bishops, to Rome and to state prosecutors. We also provide practical advice for former community members who may need support during their transition to autonomy. This advice covers subjects such as lodgings, social security, further education, employment and pensions.

International contacts and co-operation

Religious communities based in France are freely branching out into other countries while communities based overseas have been just as easily setting up in France. Some operate through parishes or schools and universities; others discreetly concentrate on the business sector... Over the years we have been alerted by families, friends, victims and repentant ex-members, to instances of spiritual, sexual, psychological and financial abuse by groups from abroad. Following up on these allegations, we have multiplied our international contacts and increased our co-operation with a number of victim support organisations abroad.



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Brief list of some English-speaking counter-cult organisations

NORTH AMERICA

- **CANADA - QUEBEC**

CINR - Centre information sur les Nouvelles Religions

www.cinr.qc.ca

- **USA**

REFOCUS

An organisation which provides a network of support and referrals for individuals recovering from the effects of a destructive cult, or other closed, high-demand group or relationships.

www.refocus.org

ICSA - International Cultic Studies Association

www.icsahome.com

ECA - Ending Clergy Abuse

A worldwide organization of human rights' activists and survivors from over 17 countries and 5 continents who focus on children's and victims' rights to compel the Church to end clerical abuse, especially child sexual abuse, in order to protect children and to seek effective justice for victims. ECA demands the end of the Church's structural mechanism that allows abuse.

www.ecaglobal.org

CATHOLIC UPRISING

A new advocacy website and series called Catholic Uprising has recently been launched by survivor-advocate Ryan Gilligan. A former monk, Ryan has a unique perspective on the clergy abuse crisis and is launching a new series where he talks with survivors about their stories, trying to bring more awareness to the world about abuse in the Church because there is a lot of misinformation. If you are interested in getting in touch with Ryan and being a part of his series, you can email him at ryanjgilligan@gmail.com and [you can check out CATHOLIC UPRISING on YouTube here.](#)

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EUROPE

FECRIS - European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Cults and Sects

Created in 1994, FECRIS serves as an umbrella organisation for associations which defend victims of cultic excesses in more than 30 countries to date, among them 5 are non-European.

www.fecris.org

- **IRELAND**

Dialogue Ireland

An independent trust that works to promote awareness and understanding of religious issues and cultism in Ireland.

www.dialogueireland.org

- **UNITED KINGDOM**

The Family Survival Trust

www.thefamilysurvivaltrust.org E-mail: info@thefamilysurvivaltrust.org

AUSTRALIA

- **AUSTRALIA**

CIFS in Australia

www.cifs.org.au