

Canadian nun, sexologist: Catholics must increase their sexual maturity

QUEBEC CITY — A Canadian nun with a Ph.D. in clinical sexology said the sex abuse crisis in the church does not mean “the end of faith” but rather “the end of a lack of formation and the end of deviance,” and a call to return to Jesus’ message of love.

Immaculate Conception Sister Marie-Paul Ross told the French-language Canadian news agency Presence info that the faithful must accept that ecclesial structures might need to change.

“If we really want to save the faith, the spiritual experience of the people, the depth of Christianity, and focus on evangelical values, we have no choice but to let go of the structures and build with the inspired heart. We must listen to the Word of God and the Holy Spirit,” said Sister Ross, who now lives in New Brunswick, a province the sex abuse scandal has hit hard these last years.

Among the often-heard options for change, she said, she does not think that simply allowing priests to marry and ordaining women will make sexual problems go away.

“I’ve always said this to religious and priests who felt stuck in their vocation, under the pretext that celibacy is not livable: The problem isn’t your celibacy, it’s your immaturity.”

Similarly, she says a couple “isn’t a bunch of immature people.”

“It takes a lot of maturity to form a couple and move on. Now, it’s this immaturity that I saw with my own eyes, up close, in our church structure,” said the sexologist.

Recently, she said, she has been interested in the abuse of nuns. She said she sees a lot of “naivete” among them.

“I told superiors: You don’t form women that stand up. You form little girls looking for their father, and who fall for every man who gives them a wink and tells them a

pleasant word, who tells them that she's beautiful," said Sister Ross. "I say that there is a lack of formation, of knowledge. When you try to name these realities, they exclude you."

Over the years, Sister Ross has been criticized publicly by representatives of church authority, who accuse her of portraying religious life too grimly. She said she feels stuck between a rock and a hard place, as she is criticized for her outspokenness about sexuality in the church, while society criticizes her for her choice of to continue as a nun.

The sexologist said she believes that the prevention of abuse necessarily requires formation that leads candidates to religious life to "treat deep anxieties," including traumas from their childhood.

"Sexuality is a power. Life and love pass through sexuality. We are beings of love and life," she said, adding that the church is now "faced today with a humanitarian mess."

Above all, she said, the crisis of sexual abuse occurs in a context where "society encourages pedophilia and sexual deviance," mainly because of pornography.

"Sexual deviance is created by repression and pornography. These are the two extremes. And often, the sexual formation of priests is made of both. There is a lot of repression and, in their solitude, with the internet, pornography," she said, claiming to have seen many cases over her decades of practice as a nurse and a sexologist.

One of the fruits of porn, she said, is the "inability to live human sexuality with genital, emotional, biological reactions, in love and commitment to love. It completely dissociates love and sexuality."

Younger children are exposed to pornography now. It is up to adults to teach them how to deal with this reality, "impossible" to stop, and to teach them how to develop a critical mind, she said.

"Children have, it seems, a greater capacity than the adults to capture the dignity of a human being and the dignity of a body," she said.

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Vaillancourt is editor of Presence info, based in Montreal.

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