

Victims of historic child sex abuse speak out, after Catholic Church refuses to accept “liability” for the crimes of their priests

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The Catholic Church is refusing to accept "liability" for long-term sex abuse that went on at the Mirfield Junior Seminary, despite paying out £120,000 to eleven victims of child sex abuse.

The seminary, which closed down in 1984, was run by the Verona Fathers (now known as the Comboni Missionaries) and saw sexual abuse perpetrated by priests against children as young as 11.

Three Catholic priests of the Verona Fathers are said to have repeatedly abused boys in their care. Now twelve of their victims have joined together to campaign for justice. The former pupils have launched a website to share their experiences of the seminary, called [Mirfield Memories](#), and to offer support for their fellow victims.

The men's efforts have led to many of their fellow pupils coming forward to describe their own experiences of abuse at the Mirfield Seminary.

In a press release the "Mirfield 12" describe some of the abuse they suffered at the hands of the Verona Fathers. One of three priests accused of abuse, Fr Pinkman, "used to bring boys, as young as 11 to his bedroom, to explain the facts of life to them and ask them to remove their clothes so that he could explain further. He went on to abuse many of them".

One of the boys, Anthony Smith, recalls how Pinkman "pinned me against the wall and kissed me all over my face, rubbing himself against me".

Smith, then 11 years old, felt unable to report the abuse to his parents, as the Missionaries read every letter the children sent to the outside world. Eventually, he informed the Rector of the seminary who "didn't say a word" in response to the allegations.

Another victim, Gerry McLaughlin, recounts how Fr Valmaggia (who ran the seminary's infirmary) would "lock the door" before touching McLaughlin's genitals for spurious medical reasons.

The "Mirfield 12" believe that the Catholic Church is still refusing to take responsibility for the culture of sexual abuse that existed at Mirfield.

The sole surviving priest, Fr Romano Nardo, is still living with the Verona Fathers in Italy. On one occasion during the period of the sex abuse, a child was spotted leaving Nardo's bedroom at night and the priest was immediately moved away from the seminary. West Yorkshire Police have reviewed evidence and concluded that crimes were committed, but are "unable to get an extradition order" to bring Nardo to the UK for questioning. The Comboni Missionary order have stated that the priest is "not in a mentally stable enough condition to travel".

Two of the priests, John Pinkman and Fr Valmaggia, are now dead and were never reported to the police by the Church.

One of the victims claims the abuse was carried out over two decades. The campaigners note that when Fr Valmaggia was reported, he was immediately sent away to Italy, whilst Nardo was dispatched to Uganda when one child was seen leaving his bedroom at 6am one morning.

The child in question, Mark Murray, reported Valmaggia to the Church and the police in 1997; however the priest was simply returned to Italy. According to the campaign, "none of the priests were ever reported to the police by the Comboni Missionaries, they were simply moved elsewhere".

Francis Barnes, another former student, told the *Guardian* that "the abuse was widespread, the whole culture. I knew celibacy wasn't right, that it was producing people who would veer in that direction".

Frank Warner, a pupil who raised the alarm in 1966, said that he thinks Valmaggia and Pinkman knew of each-others activities, reinforcing suspicions that the culture at the seminary tolerated the sexual abuse of children.

As [reported](#) in the *Guardian*, many of the victims have suffered a range of psychological problems as a direct result of the sexual assaults. Many of the men report struggling with alcoholism, difficulty in forming relationships and drug use, along with what victim Bede Mullen calls the "most pernicious" aspect of childhood abuse, "the fear that the victim of abuse will complete the cycle and go on to abuse others".

Recent years have seen a raft of such cases coming to light, and Pope Francis "begged" for forgiveness from the victims and condemned the Church's "complicity". For the Mirfield 12 however, the Catholic Church still has a "long way to go before true and honest dialogue and change occurs".

Nardo remains safe from extradition, and not a single priest involved in the abuse, or the subsequent cover-up, has ever faced prosecution. The Verona Fathers claim that the sex abuse "had not been proven" and after the compensation money was paid by the Comboni Missionaries, a spokesman for the order claimed that "given the passage of almost half a century, we will never know the truth of what happened".

For the victims, this isn't enough. After the victims settled their civil case out of court, the Catholic Insurance Association [said](#) "the 11 claims which have now been resolved were all settled on a purely commercial basis and with no admission of liability".

On the website, Murray recounts an exchange he recently had with the Bishop of Verona, Giuseppe Zenti, who offered "prayers" to the victims. Murray complains that "I am not short of people praying for me", and described his frustration with the stonewalling by Church authorities. The forum of the website is full of comments and experiences from victims, a sad testament to the widespread nature of the sex abuse that went on at Mirfield.

At the time of writing more victims plan to speak to West Yorkshire Police about their experiences at Mirfield, and the Mirfield 12's website has drawn significant attention from former pupils, some of whom believed they were the only victims of Valmaggia, Pinkman and Nardo, before seeing the many testimonies collected on the [Mirfield Memories](#) website.

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