

Sisters of Mary Morningstar - Maria Stella Matutina

After the publication on June 26 2023 of a report on the deviant theology and sexual abuse practised by Marie-Dominique Philippe, (founder of the Brothers of Saint John), the French catholic daily *La Croix*, investigated the Maria Stella Matutina community, a group of around 300 nuns who continue to defy Roman sanctions.

- Mikael Corre,
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Part One

Breakaway sisters defending deviant doctrines and founding new convents worldwide

Chapter I: Dissidence

The sisters of Stella Matutina are the latest incarnation of a group of nuns inspired by Marie-Dominique Philippe (founder of the Saint-Jean community, accused of sexual assault). In 2009, they went into dissidence after being accused of sectarian irregularities. Their attempt at refounding in Mexico was halted in extremis by the Vatican, so they tried again, this time in Spain.

High up in Bergara, a small town in the Spanish Basque Country, rue Goenkale runs alongside the former convent of the Poor Clares: three stories of stone facade pierced only by barred windows and a heavy studded wooden door. At the entrance, this little white sign: "Hermanas de Maria Stella Matutina" (Sisters of Mary Morning Star). We ring. The face of one of the superiors appears behind a wrought iron gate. "You belong to a respectable profession, she whispers, it's a shame to use it for slander, especially in a newspaper that calls itself Catholic. »

The sisters of Maria Stella Matutina – whose house in Bergara we will never be allowed to enter, – are the latest identity adopted by a group of sisters inspired by Marie-Dominique Philippe, founder of the Saint-Jean community in 1975. These sisters who later renamed themselves « Maria Stella Matutina » split from the Saint John Family in 2009.

The Saint John community published a new report on June 26, 2023 in the hope of turning the page, but the legacy of their Dominican founder and his promotion an all too real culture of sexual violence within the Church remains very much alive.

How is it possible that these dissident sisters are able to lay claim to the legacy of a sexual aggressor and at the same time openly recruit novices and found new priories in dioceses throughout the world? These 300 sisters are today present on every continent. How did they manage to escape the sanctions imposed on their leaders? Church authorities repeatedly tried impose discipline, but like their mentor who died in 2006, the Stella Matutina sisters had mastered the art of evading Roman sanctions.

“They reproduce what Marie-Dominique Philippe did all his life, observes a Vatican source: playing canonists against canonists, bishops against bishops, cardinals against cardinals. There’s only the pope they can’t cut in half. ” But there again ...

The incredible story of their flight from France, to Mexico and then Spain, their name-changes and refoundations, demonstrate the incapacity of the highest Catholic authorities to bring back into line a dissident community marked by sexual violence.

Chapter II: Alix Parmentier

The origins of the Stella Matutina community go back to the 1950s when "The Father", Marie-Dominique Philippe began to have sexual relations with one of his theology students, twenty years his junior, at Fribourg University. She was a former Carmelite nun named Alix Parmentier (1933-2016). She was undoubtedly one of the people closest to Marie-Dominique Philippe. according to three concordant testimonies published in the Saint-Jean report [26/06/2023].

In 1982, Father Philippe founded the Contemplative Sisters of Saint Jean and Alix Parmentier became the first prioress. She also became his private secretary, and encouraged other women to share the intimacy of her mentor, whose “sanctified flesh” she never tired of describing. Twenty-five women today accuse Marie-Dominique Philippe of having assaulted them, of having asked them to undress or perform oral sex on him, often as part of spiritual accompaniments.

Sister Alix Parmentier and The Brothers of Saint John

Psychologically fragile, increasingly jealous and suffering from eating disorders, according to several testimonies, Alix Parmentier also began in the 1970s to sexually initiate young men, often aspirants to the priesthood or religious life. La Croix was thus able to consult a letter dated February 5, 2010, written by Alix Parmentier. It is addressed to one of her victims, a priest thirteen years her junior, who has just described to the Vatican authorities the masturbation and fellatio practiced on him by the former Carmelite during prayers.

“I was reckless, writes Alix Parmentier, thirty years after the facts. I thought there was only tenderness between us. The day you burst into tears in my studio, I was very shaken, sorry to have blown up the volcano”, ends the nun asking him to “withdraw” his testimony. Other brothers subsequently abused by Alix Parmentier later reproduced on young Sisters of Saint-Jean the sexual violence they had suffered.

Chapter III: First signs of dissent

Cardinal Philippe Barbarin, Archbishop of Lyon claims that in 2009 he was trying to put the Contemplatives Sisters back on track and unaware of any sexual violence, nor of the fact that certain nuns were suffering from psychological distress – nor that one of them, for example, has just tried to set herself on fire in her car. He says that at the time, it was the lies and the influence exerted by the superiors that worried the cardinal. Questioned by La Croix, he explained that he took matters into his own hands after reading the "report of a visit (a year-long enquiry, *Editors note*) carried out by two experienced mother abbesses" ¹.

¹ From Pradines (Loire) - Mother Luc Congar, from Venière (Saône-et-Loire) - Mother Marie-Joseph Roudit.

But the attempt to reform the community met with strong resistance at the mother house of the sisters, located in Saint-Jodard (Loire). There, the lieutenants of Alix Parmentier opposed the arrival of the new prioress general appointed by the cardinal, Sister Johanna Vorstman. The revolt was led in particular by Marthe Hubac, one of the most powerful women in the community.

"We are persecuted, it is a sign of holiness,"

she explained to the nuns during a meeting dated June 19, 2009, according to the notes of a sister sent to La Croix. For a few years now, Marthe Hubac had been replacing an aging Alix Parmentier, to whom she was the assistant. In Saint-Jodard, this woman from the 7th arrondissement of Paris also combined the powers of mistress of novices, mistress of studies and spiritual director of many sisters. "We are not indoctrinated, asserts Marthe Hubac to her troops. We are faithful to the truth. God has not said his last word". The dissidence had started.

"We were told that the demon was attacking the community"

A sister present during the events

The nuns, especially the younger ones, had been kept for several weeks in a mindset of paranoia. "We were repeatedly told that the demon was attacking the community", testifies a sister present, who reports that an exorcist priest was called to sprinkle holy water on each building of the priory. Strange vigils were also organized. During one of them, of which La Croix was able to obtain a video recording, the sisters in procession placed candles in front of a picture of Marie-Dominique Philippe pinned in front of an altar, repeating the song chosen for her funeral: "The Lord is my light and my salvation, of whom should I be afraid..." On another excerpt, we see the consecrated women singing, to a martial air, an ode to chastity, surrounded by priests close to Marthe Hubac. Some of them maintained links to the community and would later be accused of sexual violence.

Such is the case of Benoît Emmanuel Peltureau-Villeneuve, reduced to a secular state in December 2022 by Rome. Since 2009, the former priest would have regularly visited several priories of Stella Matutina in Bergara (Spain), in Italy, in the United States... He would have celebrated there, confessed, and would have spoken with many sisters in private, according to four sources. "He was one of our chaplains," says a former sister of Maria Stella Matutina. Benoît Emmanuel Peltureau-Villeneuve disputes this statement and, when contacted, the former priest declared that he had "never regularly visited the convent of Bergara or other houses".

Chapter IV: The Explosion

In June 2009, when the new leader appointed by Cardinal Barbarin finally managed to enter Saint-Jodard, the heavy, stormy sky was interpreted by the sisters as an evil portent. The fifty or so recruits, under the control of Sister Marthe, were ordered not to speak to her. "We were young, aged 18 or 19, often intelligent and all very beautiful, describes a former novice. Thinking about it, you could say that Sister Marthe recruited Father's vestals..."

The efforts of the new government to free these young nuns from the grip of Marthe Hubac raised tensions to a new level. On August 19, 2009, the announcement of the appointment of a new novice mistress to replace Marthe precipitated the explosion of the community.

The announcement was received in tears and cries at the end of the afternoon. When they left the chapter house, there were only about twenty nuns who went to the chapel to pray. The others, about sixty, left the priory. Cars were waiting for them, driven by their relatives. "We hastily retrieved our personal belongings packed the day before into big garbage bags and discreetly hidden in trunks. In the chapel, the nuns who remained in prayer heard the vehicles driving away from the priory." That was the start of the great dispersion.

In the Vatican, the case of the Contemplatives was a serious cause for concern. On November 10, 2009, the sisters were placed under the guardianship of a "commissioner", the bishop emeritus Jean Bonfils, 79 years old. Rome forbade Alix Parmentier, Marthe Hubac and her twin sister Isabelle Hubac, any further contact with the nuns. The disavowed leaders were dismissed and exiled to distant convents. But from the monastery of Bet Shemesh, in Israel, Sister Marthe started to organise the resistance.

The Vatican drowned in letters of appeal

The nun soon launched her counter-offensive: since they no longer wanted her in Saint-Jean, Marthe Hubac decided to officially secede. On December 27, 2009, Bishop Bonfils was suddenly bombarded with dozens of letters from nuns from the main convents in Europe, the United States, Brazil, Mexico, India, the Philippines, Africa... Two thirds of the community asked to leave Saint-Jean. The Holy See intervened in extremis to prevent them from founding a new congregation in Mexico, where the progressive Dominican bishop of Saltillo, Mgr Raul Vera Lopez, had agreed to welcome them. A minor setback.

The dissidents continued to work in the shadows, inundating the Holy See in appeals. In their efforts, they benefited from the expertise of Sister Isabelle Hubac, a former magistrate, and the active help of priests from the powerful Roman network, such as Brother Éric de Clermont-Tonnerre, former president of the Conference of Major Superiors of France. "I intervened discreetly with the authorities of the Church to try to avoid the confrontation", the Dominican explained to La Croix, regretting that the reasons for the sanctions against the four superiors had never been explained to the rest of the community, and he says that he distanced himself from the sisters after their new foundation. In 2012 the secessionist sisters founded a new association of the faithful, the "Sisters of Saint John and Saint Dominique" in the diocese of Cordoba in Spain.

Part Two

How the followers of Marie-Dominique Philippe manipulated the Vatican

Chapter V: Protectors

This time, and the dissident sisters swore to it, they had reformed. As proof: they have added two white stripes to the edges of the scapular of their habits... It was in Cordoba, Spain, that their efforts to regroup finally came to fruition. On 29 June 2012, they created a new association in the Andalusian diocese: the "Sisters of St John and St Dominic".

But the Vatican was not fooled and retorted that the changes that had made were insignificant, before sanctioning them again on 10 January 2013. "Given that *the new association has seriously undermined ecclesiastical discipline, it is suppressed with immediate effect and without the possibility of it being reconstituted in another form*", wrote the Vatican Secretariat of State in its decree of dissolution, insisting on the fact that the decision emanated from Pope Benedict XVI himself. The recognition given to the sisters by the conservative bishop of Cordoba, Mgr Demetrio Fernandez, had thus been revoked.

Unfortunately, the nuns were offered a second chance barely a month later, thanks to a historic decision that they interpreted as a sign: the resignation of Benedict XVI. It was as if his decree had been forgotten, without anyone really understanding why. The new Pope, Francis, chose to delegate.

A Pontifical Commission was appointed to manage this issue, and this caused quite a stir in Rome. The commission, headed by Spanish Cardinal Julian Herranz Casado, included French Bishop Henri Brincard, the new commissioner for Saint-Jean, who took a hard line against the Stella Matutina sisters, and Brazilian Joao Braz de Aviz, from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, who was much more sympathetic to the dissidents. According to several sources, the atmosphere between the protagonists was "glacial".

In the meantime, the sisters had found a new base in Bergara, in the Spanish Basque country, under the protection of another conservative bishop, Mgr José Ignacio Munilla. Very opposed to Basque nationalism, Munilla was at odds with the socially-minded clergy in this de-industrialised region: 77% of the priests in his diocese had just signed a petition against his appointment. "Bishop Munilla saw in these sisters the opportunity to gain support for the diocese, and to embody a Catholicism that would win back society", explains Basque theologian Jose Arregi. Mgr Munilla, contacted by La Croix, denies this. The sisters, he explains, were welcomed to Bergara before the decree of dissolution.

Chapter VI: Pulling the strings

At the Vatican, the commission responsible for deciding on the future of the sisters made its recommendations in the summer of 2014. The choice was intended to be a balanced one, but in reality it proved impossible to implement. Cardinal Braz de Aviz travelled to Bergara in person to tell the nuns that Pope Francis had accepted the creation of the "Sisters of Maria Stella Matutina", whose statutes had been signed on 25 July 2014 by Bishop Munilla. The only quid pro quo: Alix Parmentier, sisters Marthe and Isabelle Hubac (as well as a fourth sister in a minor role) are excluded from all religious life. In Bergara, the announcement was greeted with cries and tears.

"The official superiors in Parma and Bergara are a sham".

Was this to be the end of the reign of the dissident sisters? In reality, the exclusion decrees remained a dead letter until Cardinal Braz de Aviz insisted on making them effective on 19 July 2021, in other words... seven years later. But everyone in Rome knows that none of the women sanctioned ever actually left the community. In reality, their control over it remains absolute.

In Bergara, Marthe Hubac recreated the former novitiate of Saint-Jodard (*see Part One*). She is now the "Elder Sister" (equivalent of spiritual father) of most of the sisters and the community's almost exclusive teacher. A former member of Stella Matutina confides that *"75% of the classes attended by the sisters are now given by Sister Marthe"*. Her twin sister, Isabelle Hubac, was head of the Fontanellato convent, near Parma (Italy), until at least 2017. A photo from that time shows her with the bishop of the diocese, Mgr Enrico Solmi.

"Officially, I was the prioress of a convent", Nadège Cambon (ex-sister Gabriel), who has now left the Stella Matutina, explained to *La Croix*. *"Everyone knows that the official superiors of the priories in Parma or Bergara, are a sham"*, continues the young woman. And she should know as she herself had served as a puppet representative for the association of the "Sisters of St John and St Dominic", that briefly existed in Cordoba.

Chapter VII: Psychological distress

Fifteen years after the seriously dysfunctional management that caused so much psychological suffering among the contemplative nuns of Saint-Jean, nothing seems to have changed at Stella Matutina. The testimonies seen by *La Croix* describe the same frantic pace of daily life, meals eaten alone in the cells, begging, psychological hold and mental pressure of the senior sisters sitting at the top of a pyramidal, infantilisation, exhaustion, depression and suicide attempts hidden from the families... *"I really saw myself wasting away, I suffered enormously"*, says Nadège Cambon, who left the community in 2017. *"When I left, I realised that I was completely destroyed,"* adds another former nun, who points out that at least fifty sisters were in a state of psychological distress in the mid-2010s.

A sister (from Stella Matutina) told me that no psychological assessment was required to enter the community because the founder believed that Jesus welcomed all kinds of people," explains a former American postulant who spent a week on retreat with Stella Matutina in the spring of 2022. *I've heard this reasoning the other way round: as a way of more easily manipulating emotionally unstable aspirants."*

An ex-aspirant who left Stella Matutina in March 2022, after two years of community life, tells another story. *"I was struggling psychologically with depression and anxiety. The sisters wouldn't allow me to talk to a psychologist. The only person with whom she was allowed to speak freely was her novice mistress. "Nothing has changed in the unhealthy and dangerous practices that have existed since the origin of the community,"* she concludes.

Chapter VIII: Silence

Despite these more or less obvious dysfunctions and the decree expelling the four superiors, the sisters retain a great deal of support within the Church. The funeral of the community's co-founder, Alix Parmentier, who died in February 2016, was celebrated with great pomp by Mgr Braulio Rodriguez Plaza, Archbishop of Toledo until 2019, in the presence of the Bishop of Cordoba. Alix's

body lies in Almonacid, near Toledo, where she was buried wearing the habit of a nun, which the Vatican had forbidden.

The former bishop of Saltillo, Mgr Raul Vera Lopez, now emeritus, who had tried to establish a Stella Matutina community in his diocese in Mexico now pleads their case in Rome. In May 2023, according to two concordant sources, this Dominican who has become the great protector of the Stella Matutina sisters again alerted Pope Francis, to whom he is close, of the "*martyrdom of these poor sisters*" persecuted by French bishops.

The sisters, whose flight to Mexico is said to have cost tens of thousands of euros, are also receiving a great deal of financial support. In August 2022, two witnesses confirmed that they had seen Marthe Hubac in Cenves (Rhône). A year earlier, the ex-nun had played a major role in negotiating the purchase from the brothers of Saint-Jean and the diocese of Lyon of several buildings representing 30% of the centre of this small hamlet, which before 2009 housed the contemplative nuns' theology house. The purpose of this investment? To set up "*a clandestine convent*", Marthe Hubac is said to have quipped at a mediation meeting. The money for the transaction was said to have come from a wealthy Swiss lawyer, the father of one of the sisters.

With the exception of Cardinal Barbarin and Mgr Munilla, none of the Church authorities mentioned responded to questions from *La Croix*. As for the sisters of Stella Matutina, we visited their motherhouse in the Spanish Basque country on 28 January 2023. We wanted to hear their version of events.

Chapter IX: The motherhouse in Bergara

After refusing us access to the convent in Bergara, the superior, whose face appeared behind a wrought-iron grille, asked us to send her an e-mail with our questions. A few hours later, we wrote to her from a hotel room: "*My first question concerns the sexual violence committed by your founder Marie-Dominique Philippe and other brothers or ex-brothers of the Saint-Jean community against nuns. How have you ensured that there are no victims in your group?*"

According to a report published on 26 June 2023, 72 brothers of the Saint-Jean community committed sexual violence between 1975 and 2022. A total of 167 victims were identified, but none of the sisters of Stella Matutina gave evidence. Each year, the sisters celebrate the anniversary of the death of Marie-Dominique Philippe with a special liturgy in their psalter. The "father", whom 25 women accuse of assaulting them, asking them to take their clothes off or performing oral sex on him, often as part of their spiritual guidance, is considered a quasi-saint in their community. His smiling face is everywhere on the walls of the priories and on the pious images published by the sisters. Their name, Stella Matutina, refers to one of her books: *L'Étoile du matin. Entretiens sur la Vierge Marie* (1998).

We received a reply from the Bergara convent two days after our return from the Spanish Basque Country. It was signed by Sister Cécile-Christina, the official novice mistress at Bergara, and a close friend of Marthe Hubac.

"I received your questions. I was very surprised by them," she wrote to La Croix. This does not seem to me to be an investigation for a religious life... Whatever answer I give, I fear that it will only meet with the same doubt and lack of confidence that you yourself showed when you came to Bergara. I think it's better to remain silent.

The Twists and Turns of Roman sanctions

- Spring 2009** Explosion of the community of contemplative sisters of Saint-Jean.
- 29 June 2012** The dissident sisters set up a new association in Cordoba, the "Sisters of St John and St Dominic".
- 10 January 2013** Benedict XVI decided to abolish the new association, *"without the possibility of its being reconstituted in another form"*.
- 28 February 2013** Benedict XVI resigns from the papacy.
- 25 July 2014** Pope Francis approves the statutes of the new association of the "Sisters of Maria Stella Matutina".
The four superiors are excluded from religious life.
- 19 July 2021** The Vatican insisted that the exclusion decrees, which had still not been implemented, be made effective.
