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The Associated Press

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A Togolese nun has successfully defended a first-ever dissertation at a Vatican-sanctioned university on the sexual abuse of nuns by priests — the latest evidence of a problem confronting the Catholic Church in the #MeToo era.

Sr. Makamatine Lembo was awarded summa cum laude at her defense Sept. 26 at the Pontifical Gregorian University and was praised by her examiners for her courage in tackling such a taboo subject.

Lembo's dissertation explored the relational dynamics behind the sexual abuse of nuns by priests, focusing on nine victims in five sub-Saharan countries. It found that the abuses involved entrenched power imbalances that made consent impossible, a yearslong grooming process and often money given to poor sisters in exchange for sex.

Examiner Sr. Brenda Dolphin thanked Lembo "on behalf of consecrated women all over the world," particularly for delving into issues of consent and the often complicit role played by the nuns' religious superiors who fail to help sisters when they report abuse.

Noting the culture of silence in the church surrounding sex abuse issue, she said: "That wasn't an easy thing to do."

The Vatican has been forced to confront the abuse of nuns after its own women's magazine denounced the problem and religious sisters, emboldened by the #MeToo reckoning that adults can be victims of sexual abuse, began speaking out and demanding justice.

Earlier this year, Pope Francis publicly vowed to do more to fight the problem, although examiner Karlijn Demasure noted during Lembo's defense that the Vatican has had two major reports on the topic in its hands since the 1990s and yet "very little" has been done to address the problem.

Demasure, who is leaving the Gregorian to launch a new center for safeguarding minors and vulnerable people at St. Paul University in Ottawa, said Lembo's research was novel in that it represented a grassroots approach that was "an important step for prevention."

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Lembo told The Associated Press that she was inspired to research the topic after fellow sisters told her of their illicit relationships with priests that they couldn't escape. She said she realized they were abusive in nature, not consensual, and caused the nuns great spiritual and personal suffering.

"After these experiences, they live, but they don't live," she said of the sisters who participated in her research.

"I said 'We have to do something to free these women,'" Lembo said. "We have to help her have the courage to say 'No.' "