

France, the Vatican, and the Pan-Asian Sexual Abuse Scandals of MEP Missionaries

Both French authorities and the Vatican seem reluctant to act on accusations of sexual abuse by French priests in Japan, Thailand, Cambodia, and more.

By [Michel Chambon](#)

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Credit: [Depositphotos](#)

Earlier this month, French President Emmanuel Macron accepted the resignation of Catholic Bishop Gilles Reithinger. A few days later, the Holy See confirmed the stepping down of the 51-year-old cleric. No explanation was given for this unusual departure, but the prelate is embroiled in numerous allegations of sexual abuse perpetrated by French missionaries across all of Asia.

In a documentary released by France 24 in September 2023, [“A Deafening Silence,”](#) Father Philippe, a French priest in Japan who is himself accused of sexual abuse, confessed that he had sexual relations with his ecclesial supervisor, Reithinger. This occurred years ago when Philippe was studying in Paris. Later the young missionary was sent to Japan while Reithinger became the superior of the French missionary society, the [Missions Etrangères de Paris \(MEP\)](#) – a prestigious Catholic organization operating across all of Asia. [A dozen Asian countries host MEP missionaries.](#)

Father Camille, an MEP missionary who served in Thailand, claimed that he had reported numerous allegations of sexual abuse perpetrated by French priests in Thailand. But according to him, Reithinger failed to conduct an adequate investigation.

In France, Reithinger is also [accused of not reporting to the police an](#) alleged act of sexual abuse perpetrated by his MEP predecessor, Bishop George Colomb, a former missionary in China and Taiwan. Before becoming bishop of La Rochelle and Saintes, Colomb was the superior of the MEP until 2016. [After being accused by a young French man of sexual assault perpetrated in 2013](#), Colomb had stepped down from his episcopal duties last year, and an investigation is underway.

Given all these allegations, the resignation of Gilles Reithinger was not a surprise. Yet, the French Bishops' conference released [a press statement suggesting that medical issues](#) were behind his sudden departure. Without a word about the pan-Asian accusations affecting the MEP, the French bishops wished a prompt recovery to their colleague. Meanwhile, the French press revealed that Reithinger is now resting in a [four-star spa-hotel in Mulhouse](#).

It is true that in the Catholic Church, supposed health problems have been repeatedly mobilized to legitimize the sudden disappearance of a problematic priest, bishop, or cardinal. For Reithinger, however, health problems have also been a personal pattern. After his priestly ordination in 1999 and some English training in Chelsea, London, the young missionary

was sent to Singapore. After a year in the wealthy Southeast Asian city-state, Reithinger was suddenly sent back to France – officially because of health problems. These medical difficulties, however, were not serious enough to prevent him from becoming the superior of the MEP and then an auxiliary bishop.

For the French government and the Vatican, all these stories are highly embarrassing. The two authorities have been closely associated with Reithinger. In northeastern France, it is the French government that appoints and remunerates Catholic clergymen. In 2021, French President Emmanuel Macron approved the recruitment of Reithinger as auxiliary bishop of Strasbourg, despite his extremely short missionary experience, pre-existing medical conditions, and rumors about sexual abuse. Given those problems, it is not obvious why the superior of the MEP was promoted.

Furthermore, the episcopal ordination of Reithinger was officiated by the secretary of state of the Vatican, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the second most important figure of the Holy See. It is unusual, out of protocol, and disproportionate for a top leader of the Vatican to come to a small city to ordain an auxiliary bishop. Clearly, Reithinger had an extensive network of friends and supporters.

The investigative journalist [Laetitia Chereil](#) [had revealed](#) that the missionary society supervised by Reithinger until 2021 is extremely rich. Yet it is unclear whether this explains the favors and honors received by the former head of the MEP.

The Catholic missionary organization is worth at least 1.5 billion euros – but probably more. The scope of their wealth remains secret, even to most of their members. The headquarters of the organization is a luxurious property in central Paris. It has the largest private garden of the French capital, and its value is estimated at around 1 billion euros.

The missionaries also own properties in southern France, Tokyo, Hong Kong, Singapore, and elsewhere. Behind that, their organization has hundreds of millions of euros invested in stock markets in North America, Europe, and Asia. For a religious group with less than 200 priests, it means that each missionary is virtually a multimillionaire.

Over the past decades, the immense wealth of the MEP has allowed them to abundantly finance the higher education of hundreds of Asian priests and nuns. Today, many of these better-trained clergy people are in positions of leadership across Catholic Asia. When they hear accusations against the French

missionaries, they are often both embarrassed and voiceless.

Additionally, the MEP has repeatedly made large donations to a number of Catholic media outlets in Europe and Asia. Although this generosity has helped the diffusion of information about Asian Catholics, it also makes these media more hesitant about reporting the pan-Asian scandals affecting the French missionaries.

As the unexplained resignation of Bishop Reithinger suggests, the French government and the Holy See are also hesitant about the best way to respond to the crisis. Despite a few investigations in France, there are no clear efforts to address the accusations in Asia. It is as if these Catholic missionaries and French citizens who spend most of their life in Asia can commit abuses in France only. Serious allegations coming from Cambodia, Japan, and Thailand receive little attention.

Within the MEP, it is a former associate of Reithinger, Father Vincent Senechal, who is in charge of bringing truth and justice. As the new superior of the MEP, this former missionary in Cambodia announced last year that [the missionary society had officially hired GCPS](#), a British consulting firm, to assist them in reviewing their archives and preparing a report before December 2023.

Months after that deadline, no report has been released and no additional information given. The MEP remains silent. Their methodology for researching possible abuses across Asia – and the amount that [the British firm](#) is charging them – remains secret.

Given the international nature of these scandals and knowing the tendency of religious organizations to move problematic members across borders, only the Holy See has the ecclesial authority to address the crisis. No bishop in France or in Asia can force the MEP to clarify their responses to sexual abuses.

Institutionally, the MEP is supervised by the Dicastery for Evangelization in Rome. Consequently, it is its pro-prefect, the Filipino Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, who has canonical responsibility. The cardinal is close to the MEP and has been personally informed of allegations coming from Asia.

In addition to his long experience serving the Church in the Philippines and in the rest of Asia, Cardinal Tagle has various tools to seek justice for people who have been sexually abused and for missionaries who suffered from these scandals.

In Rome, the Gregorian University has developed [a dedicated research center](#) analyzing the roots and mechanism of sexual abuse. This center provides scientific

guidelines and technical resources to prevent such abuse. Furthermore, within missionary societies similar to the MEP, there are a number of senior leaders with the necessary ecclesial skills who could receive full authority to investigate within the MEP. It is a matter of determination.

But French civil authorities must also uphold their responsibilities. France has numerous legal agreements with Asian countries to facilitate investigations and make French citizens accountable to French justice. Sexual crimes perpetrated in Asia by French people are no less important than those perpetrated in France. Adequate means of reporting must be made available to the victims.

Even though the unexplained and discreet resignation of Bishop Reithinger reveals the embarrassment of the Holy See and French government, systematic investigation within the MEP system seems more necessary than ever. It is urgent that French authorities and the Vatican demonstrate clearly how they take their legal and canonical responsibilities.

Editor's note: After publication, The Diplomat received the following reply from the MEP Society:

Since 1658, the Catholic missionary society MEP has been present in Asia, where it has sent more than 4,300 missionaries over the

centuries. Today it is courageously facing up to a number of cases of sexual abuse in France and Asia. Following internal investigations, an external audit by the British firm GCPS Consulting is currently underway and will report its findings in December 2024. The Vatican has been informed by MEP of the need for this external audit and the results will be communicated to it as a matter of priority.

In this article, Mr. Chambon's use of the adjectives "pan-Asia," "numerous," and "systematic" is a strategy to encourage the reader to think that cases of sexual abuse committed by MEP members are massive and widespread. The audit will shed light on this, but to date the situation known by MEP is not the apocalyptic situation described in the article. In his article, he refers only to the four cases of Thailand and Japan, which when they came to light were precisely the cause of the MEP audit decision.

Mr. Chambon portrays the MEP as a rich, secretive society that buys the silence of bishops and the media. He implies secret connections with the highest levels of the Vatican in order to have some of its members appointed to positions of responsibility in the Church, and thus enjoy "favours and honors." This highly subjective portrait does not stand up to the reality of the figures. At the beginning of the 20th century, the MEP had

over a hundred bishops, but today there are only five. They live as close as possible to the people and are at their service. If one of them was ordained by the Vatican's Cardinal Secretary of State, it was because the Cardinal was visiting one of Europe's oldest sanctuaries for the 1300th anniversary jubilee, and the ordination was included in this visit. There is no conspiracy link to be made here.

As for the MEP's heritage, Mr. Chambon puts forward figures that are neither sourced nor argued. His cliché about "each missionary is virtually a multimillionaire" is a truly scandalous technique for casting aspersions on missionaries who work alongside the people of the countries where they live, who are often poor. As for the supposed silence of the bishops and the media that the MEP are allegedly buying, here again this gratuitous assertion does not stand up to reality. The aim of the MEP has always been to support the dioceses in Asia. They have always given and passed on to these dioceses everything that they have built and have only kept a few houses, which are necessary for the life of a society. It is dishonest to equate the selfless efforts of the MEP to support the missionary work of the dioceses and the training of their leaders in Asia with the purchase of a silence. As for the MEP buying the so-called silence of the Catholic media in Europe and Asia, it is an

insult to these media to suggest that they could be corrupt. The media coverage of the four cases in Thailand and Japan clearly proves the contrary.

To conclude with the main point, yes, it is well known that the MEP Society has experienced some cases of abuse, which they courageously confront today. The methodology used by the external audit firm GCPS Consulting is professional. The end date of the audit is known: December 2024. The controversy that Mr. Chambon is trying to create is futile and pointless.

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AUTHORS

GUEST AUTHOR

Michel Chambon

Michel Chambon is a research fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore and a coordinator of [ISAC, the Initiative for the Study of Asian Catholics](#). Follow him on X (formerly Twitter) @MichelChambon.

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