



Antonio Messina, pictured in an undated photo, was abused by Father Giuseppe Rugolo, a diocesan priest, who was found guilty in March of sexually abusing two minors when he was a seminarian. Messina was 16 at the time. The court on July 24, 2024, published its "Statement of Reasons," an extensive 222-page document explaining the court's guilty verdict against Father Rugolo and stated that Bishop Rosario Gisana of Piazza Armerina was "well aware for many years of the reports made concerning the abuse suffered by" Messina. (OSV News/courtesy Antonio Messina)

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The bishop of a southern Italian diocese deliberately avoided protecting victims in his diocese and instead sought to protect a priest long accused of having abused several minors as a seminarian, a court in the southern Italian city of Enna ruled.

The court July 24 published its "Statement of Reasons," an extensive 222-page document explaining the court's guilty verdict against Father Giuseppe Rugolo, a diocesan priest, who was found guilty in March of sexually abusing two minors, including Antonio Messina, who was 16 at the time.

A copy of the court's ruling was obtained by OSV News.

The three-judge tribunal — Francesco Paolo Pitarresi, Elisa D'Aveni and Maria Rosaria Santoni — stated that Bishop Rosario Gisana of Piazza Armerina was "well aware for many years of the reports made concerning the abuse suffered by" Messina.

Gisana, the judges said, "not only deliberately delayed meeting with Messina and his family, but avoided implementing any form of control or measure to protect the faithful, especially adolescents who were part of the religious community he led, which his position required him to do."

Rugolo was convicted March 5 on charges of aggravated sexual assault against Messina and another unnamed victim. The priest, who was a seminarian at the time of the abuse, was sentenced to more than four years in prison and barred from teaching and holding public office.

Gisana and the Diocese of Piazza Armerina were also found civilly liable for their attempts to cover up the abuse.

In its ruling, the tribunal said Rugolo "committed the sexual abuse of two young teenagers with impunity ... fully aware that he could count on the support of the religious leadership, which helped to reinforce Father Rugolo's image as a prominent member of the local clergy to the outside world."

Gisana said July 26 in the Italian newspaper La Stampa that he had "not 'facilitated the predatory activity' of anyone," and that once the crime was reported — committed when he was not yet the bishop of the place — he acted.

The trial against Rugolo was however notable for the public release of recordings made by the accused priest during private conversations with Gisana, which proved the opposite.

Rugolo provided the secret recordings during his trial, which offered an in-depth look at how church authorities in Italy often view and handle accusations of abuse.

In one conversation, recorded after Rugolo was transferred to another diocese after the allegations became public, Gisana expressed his sympathy for the priest, assuring him that due to the investigation, "all the prerequisites are there for you to become a saint."

In another recording, also referring to the abuse investigation, the Italian bishop said he hoped that the Lord would help "stop this demonic impetus."

"But what should I do? I can't take it anymore!" Rugolo told the bishop after learning that prosecutors opened the investigation against him.

"I know 'gioia mia' ('my joy' in Italian)," Bishop Gisana responded, using an affectionate term to address the priest. "However, right now, I don't know what to do either. The only thing we can do is to pray to the Lord because the problem is not only yours, but mine as well because I covered up this story."

Those conversations, as well as conversations recorded by Messina's parents in which Gisana offered to pay them 25,000 euros (US \$27,361) in cash, were chronicled in a seven-episode podcast series titled "La Confessione" ("The Confession").

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The court said Messina's testimony at the trial "showed particular lucidity, coherence and logic.

In a phone interview with OSV News July 25, Messina said he felt vindicated by the court's ruling, which was "very clear" about the actions made by Bishop Gisana and members of the local clergy to protect Rugolo.

He also said the court's statement raises questions about whether Gisana was honest with Pope Francis, who had publicly defended the bishop.

During an audience Nov. 6, 2023, with a group from the Little House of Mercy of Gela, an association serving the poor in the Diocese of Piazza Armerina, the pope praised the bishop as a "just man."

"I greet Bishop Rosario Gisana of Piazza Armerina: He is good, this bishop, good. He was persecuted, slandered, yet he stood firm, always, (he is) just, a just man."

"In my opinion, (the ruling) refutes Pope Francis' words in every way," Messina told OSV News. "It seems to me that in light of what the panel of judges describes in its 'Statement of Reasons,' there is no slander, no persecution; only the facts."

Messina said he sent a second letter to Francis regarding his case, as well as letters to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Dicastery for the Clergy and the Dicastery for Bishops.

Gisana continues to lead the Diocese of Piazza Armerina despite the fact he was caught admitting to covering up the abuse. Such an action by a bishop would be subject to investigation under "Vos Estis Lux Mundi," ("You are the light of the world"), the pope's 2019 document that sets out procedures that hold responsible bishops, religious superiors and others in the case of covering up abuse.

Furthermore, Messina told OSV News that he has also faced hostility by members of the diocesan curia and clergy members since revealing the abuse he suffered. Despite the guilty verdict, he said, "I have never received a word of apology, no one has ever contacted me from the diocese."

"It's clear to me that part of the clergy here tried in every way to give an absolutely distorted view of reality — both of what was happening inside the courtroom and what the actual story was — which I then complained because I was labeled as a homosexual seeking revenge, as a person who was in love and that I had to make this priest pay; this 'poor priest' who had a weak moment," Messina said.

Despite this, as well as "a public aggression that escalated into physical and verbal assault" by a member of a religious community, Messina said he has "received a lot of solidarity from my city" and attends a parish community where "I felt welcomed and liked."

Messina told OSV News that despite the difficulties, he hopes that other victims of clergy sexual abuse, especially in Italy, will have the strength to speak out.

"I understand very much the position they may be in today if someone is still afraid to speak out because I myself have suffered a series of attacks that still continue and will continue throughout this process. It is certainly not easy to deal with all of this," he said.

"But it's important they find the courage to denounce (their abuse); also because, in my point of view, I believe the way these cases are treated by the court system in Italy is changing."