



Laywomen Nancy Speeckaert, left, and Marijke Devaddere, right, lead a service as parishioners sit at the Don Bosco church in Buizingen, Belgium, Sunday, Sept. 8, 2024. (AP/Geert Vanden Wijngaert)

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The congregation at the Don Bosco church solemnly took the holy host after it was blessed during a Sunday service by Nancy Speeckaert — a woman. Only a week earlier, to equal excitement, she had also blessed a wedding.

On both occasions, the humble neighborhood church was filled to near capacity with generations of joyous faithful. And if a key tenet of Catholic doctrine was breached by a woman celebrating the sacrament, it was all covered by a coat of religious love.

Two miles southwest, in the center of the same town of 44,000 near Brussels, less than half of Halle's big Saint Martin's Basilica was filled for Sunday's main Mass, where within minutes of the liturgy starting, words about guilt and calls of “go away, Satan” echoed among the stone pillars.

Pope Francis will be visiting Belgium from Thursday to Sunday, facing a flock ravaged by countless scandals of priest sexual abuse and dwindling in the face of modernity, where women and gay people insist on an equal role and rights.

For years now, progressive Don Bosco had increasingly sought its own way and in March, the Flemish Brabant Mechelen vicarship said it could no longer function as a Catholic parish “partly because of the different views on the celebration of the sacraments.” The Catholic leadership, however, allowed the Don Bosco community to continue its activities in the church as it prepares to become “an independent religious community.”

“They were coloring outside the lines,” admonished the Rev. Guy De Keersmaecker, the Catholic priest working beyond retirement age to take on the more orthodox but dwindling Saint Martin's parish. “Come on. In our church, we do have something like a constitution.”

At Don Bosco, the community feels it needs fixing, countered Speeckaert. “We have a lawyer in our group who said a constitution may have been written once, but we always must consider whether it needs change to improve society and the world,” she said.

Coming off a trip to sweltering Southeast Asia, where churches are full and [Francis drew record-setting crowds](#), a European homecoming in this once overwhelmingly Catholic nation, where some churches have now turned into sports clubs or fashion shops, might feel a lot colder for Francis.

“Parish without a Pope”

In the back of Don Bosco, retired priest Rik Deville is still a regular in the parish he molded, decades after he decried the Catholic Church in his 1992 book “The Last Dictatorship.”

With his call for “a parish without a pope” he reaped a whirlwind of criticism from bishops, right up to the Vatican. To his amazement though, he had broken through another barrier. People started calling him up, and broke down over the phone reliving long-suppressed memories of sexual abuse and rape by priests and clergy. “One person after another, and then another — and then another,” he remembers.

He became a torchbearer for those victims. What had often been rumors of rampant abuse gained credibility in a groundswell of scandal that engulfed priests, bishops the nation's cardinal who was once tipped as a papal candidate. Each time the abuse and cover-up proved more deep-seated than previously thought, a pattern seen across many of Europe's most devout nations like Ireland, Spain and Poland.

Within his Human Rights in the Church group alone, “we wrote around the year 2000 that we had a lot of files — 84 — and I thought it was a lot. Now we are running up to 2,000, some 1,950 children that have been abused in this little speck of land,” he said.

“At first, I went to the cardinal,” said Deville. “Nothing happened. He knew nothing. Could do nothing. Or wrote: ‘I prayed for you.’”

When Bruges Bishop Roger Vangheluwe admitted with little apparent remorse in 2010 that he had sexually abused his nephew, the Vatican imposed no stern punishment. Pope Francis only defrocked him earlier this year — 14 years later — in a move widely seen as a bid to stem criticism ahead of his visit.

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The pope will be meeting with abuse victims in private during his trip. But Deville said he has seen how a small number are being handpicked, expecting they will not cause a stir. “The pope has been in so many nations where there has been a clamor over sexual abuse — Ireland, Canada and others. Each time, here too, he will address victims, a tap on the shoulder. We will pray for you. A rosary as gift,” Deville

said. “The pope will get on the plane and the file will remain as is.”

“Careful he is as the captain”

During all those years, church attendance sank throughout most of Europe and Belgium — certainly in Saint Martin's, where a decades-long renovation restored the splendor of stone but hardly filled the pews. Priest De Keersmaecker knows what is wrong.

“The situation is totally changed now. We have had the whole sexual abuse scandal and the Vangheluwe case,” he said. “It has left deep scars in our church.”

Yet, unlike Deville, he is sticking with the Vatican, Pope Francis and with Mass celebrations that easily fill pensioners with memories of their youth. “The pope is someone who doesn't let go of the core of our religion. So, yes, careful — careful he is as the captain of the ship of the church which is going through rough waters.”

These days only 8.9% of Belgians go to Mass at least once a month. No figures for weekly attendance, so long the standard, were immediately available.

De Keersmaecker said he would like to see more progressive elements, including for women, but Europe is held back by others.

“It is something that needs to be looked at. We are within a global church and there are regions and continents where it is still not thought possible,” he said, calling for “loyalty with the wider Catholic community,” which Don Bosco refused to show.

Speeckaert was only drawn into an ever bigger role at Don Bosco because when Deville retired in 2009, there simply was no one to replace him. Since the days when every parish had its priest, Belgium is increasingly hard-pressed to find men who want to be priests. In a nation of 11 million, only 9 were ordained as priests in 2022.

Don Bosco took it step by step, literally putting on paper how it wanted to celebrate Mass. “We practiced behind closed doors how to do it all,” said Speeckaert. And gradually, commitments and involvement grew until suddenly it included women celebrating the sacraments.

“I never had the feeling that I was passing over a threshold because it all came gradually,” she said.

For church authorities, action came late, long after they seemed to accommodate the wayward parish. Speeckaert said they might have brought on their own expulsion when they started confronting church authorities. “We felt a more strict line was coming and that a number of things amounted to infringements on human rights.”

With the expulsion as a parish, which is to be complete by the end of next year, Don Bosco said it will miss out on 60,000 euros of funds a year while it remains unclear exactly what they can do with the church building.

Speeckaert hoped it could have been different. “I am rather naive and believe in the kindness of people and thought: Come on, they will dare to do it! And they didn't,” she said. “It hit me hard.”

There will be a service in Don Bosco — with a woman presiding — at the very minute Pope Francis holds mass for 35,000 at the King Baudouin stadium Sept. 29. If the pope draws some faithful away, Speeckaert won't mind. “It is not because people think more conservatively that we cannot deal with it.”

“Everyone can do their own thing in their own way.”