

# OBSERVATORY ON INTOLERANCE AND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST CHRISTIANS IN EUROPE



## WRITTEN OBSERVATIONS

*submitted to the European Court of Human Rights  
in the case*

*Asociación De Abogados Cristianos v. Spain  
(Application No. 22604/18)*

Ellen Kryger Fantini  
*Executive Director*

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1. The Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe (OIDAC) was founded primarily to research, analyze, document, and report the ranges of hostilities Christians face in Europe, such as physical attacks and threats against individual Christians or communities, desecration and vandalism of Christian sites.<sup>1</sup>
2. The OIDAC's mission is to contribute to a Europe where Christians may fully exercise their fundamental rights to freedom of religion, conscience, expression, and association, without fear of reprisals, censorship, threats, or violence.
3. The OIDAC is the only pan-European observatory of anti-Christian incidents in Europe.
4. Since its founding, the OIDAC has documented approximately 3,300 incidents across Europe.
5. The OIDAC compiles annual submissions for inclusion in the Hate Crime Report of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).
6. The OSCE/ODIHR defines hate crimes as "criminal acts motivated by bias or prejudice towards particular groups of people. A hate crime therefore comprises two distinct elements: It is an act that constitutes an offence under criminal law; and in committing the crime, the perpetrator acts on the basis of prejudice or bias."<sup>2</sup>
7. Bias or prejudice is broadly defined as "preconceived negative opinions, intolerance or hatred directed to a particular group . . . [with] a common characteristic . . . such as race, ethnicity, language, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, or other characteristic."<sup>3</sup>
8. The OSCE/ODIHR advises civil society organizations that bias indicators include: Victim's perception; Conduct of the offender; Significant of the property targeted to the victim or particular community; Location or timing; Comments, gestures, symbols or graffiti".<sup>4</sup>
9. The number of incidents submitted to the OSCE/ODIHR by the OIDAC has increased consistently each year.
10. As a result of the OIDAC's data collection, we can observe trends in the incidents across Europe. The phenomenon of consecrated hosts being stolen and often being desecrated or used as part of another crime is increasing.

### Significance of the Consecrated Host

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<sup>1</sup>Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe, 'About Us/What We Do', <https://www.intoleranceagainstchristians.eu/index.php?id=29>.

<sup>2</sup> Preventing and responding to hate crimes A resource guide for NGOs in the OSCE region, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/8/a/39821.pdf>, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pp. 21-24.

11. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Eucharist is "the source and summit of the Christian life." And "The other sacraments, and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate, are bound up with the Eucharist and are oriented toward it. For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself, our Pasch."<sup>5</sup>
  
12. "We speak of the *Most Blessed Sacrament* because it is the Sacrament of sacraments. The Eucharistic species reserved in the tabernacle are designated by this same name."<sup>6</sup> "At the heart of the Eucharistic celebration are the bread and wine that, by the words of Christ and the invocation of the Holy Spirit, become Christ's Body and Blood."<sup>7</sup>
  
13. "The mode of Christ's presence under the Eucharistic species is unique. It raises the Eucharist above all the sacraments as 'the perfection of the spiritual life and the end to which all the sacraments tend.' In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist 'the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, *the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained.*' This presence is called 'real' - by which is not intended to exclude the other types of presence as if they could not be 'real' too, but because it is presence in the fullest sense: that is to say, it is a *substantial* presence by which Christ, God and man, makes himself wholly and entirely present."<sup>8</sup> "It is by the conversion of the bread and wine into Christ's body and blood that Christ becomes present in this sacrament."<sup>9</sup>
  
14. "The Council of Trent summarizes the Catholic faith by declaring: 'Because Christ our Redeemer said that it was truly his body that he was offering under the species of bread, it has always been the conviction of the Church of God, and this holy Council now declares again, that by the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. This change the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called transubstantiation."<sup>10</sup>
  
15. "The Eucharistic presence of Christ begins at the moment of the consecration and endures as long as the Eucharistic species subsist. Christ is present whole and entire in each of the species and whole and entire in each of their parts, in such a way that the breaking of the bread does not divide Christ."<sup>11</sup>
  
16. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops explains why some of the consecrated hosts are reserved after the celebration of the Mass: "While it would be possible to eat all of the bread that is consecrated during the Mass, some is usually

<sup>5</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, Part 2, Section 2, Chapter 1, Article 3, Paragraph 1324, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c1a3.htm](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c1a3.htm).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, para. 1330.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, para. 1333.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, para. 1374.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, para. 1375.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, para. 1376.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, para. 1377.

kept in the tabernacle. The Body of Christ under the appearance of bread that is kept or 'reserved' after the Mass is commonly referred to as the 'Blessed Sacrament.' There are several pastoral reasons for reserving the Blessed Sacrament. First of all, it is used for distribution to the dying ( *Viaticum*), the sick, and those who legitimately cannot be present for the celebration of the Eucharist. Secondly, the Body of Christ in the form of bread is to be adored when it is exposed, as in the Rite of Eucharistic Exposition and Benediction, when it is carried in eucharistic processions, or when it is simply placed in the tabernacle, before which people pray privately."<sup>12</sup>

17. The OIDAC has observed that the reaction to theft and desecration of consecrated hosts from the religious communities is universal: that it is among the most serious incidents they experience.

#### Examples of Incidents:

##### France

18. The prosecutor's office in Nîmes opened an investigation after severe desecration was discovered in the church of Notre-Dame des Enfants on February 5, 2019. A cross was drawn on a wall with human excrement on which pieces of consecrated hosts were stuck. The tabernacle was broken and other consecrated hosts were destroyed. The Bishop of Nîmes, issued a statement: "The desecration of Notre-Dame-des-Enfants Church in Nîmes greatly affects our diocesan community. The sign of the cross and the Blessed Sacrament have been the subject of serious injurious actions. This act of profanation hurts us all in our deepest convictions. Under these conditions, worship can no longer be celebrated in this building until the profanation has been repaired by a penitential rite."<sup>13</sup>
19. During the night from March 1st to March 2nd, 2020, someone broke into and vandalized the church of Trémoré (Côtes-d'Armor). The tabernacle was destroyed and the consecrated hosts were found scattered on the ground. "This is an act that seriously wounds the faithful because it touches the Eucharist, the most sacred reality of our faith," said Mgr Denis Moutel, bishop of Saint-Brieuc. The church had to remain closed after the incident, until a Reparation Mass in the presence of the bishop was held.<sup>14</sup>
20. The church of Saint-Éloi (diocese of Compiègne, Oise) was robbed, vandalized, and desecrated between the 3rd and 9th of August, 2019. Sound equipment, a ciborium, an aspergillum (a liturgical implement used to sprinkle holy water), holy water font, and other liturgical objects were stolen. The burglars forced open the tabernacle to steal the ciborium and stole consecrated hosts, as well. "The most essential thing for us is that the tabernacle was forced, and that the Blessed Sacrament, the presence

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<sup>12</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "The Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Sacrament of the Eucharist: Basic Questions and Answers", <http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/the-mass/order-of-mass/liturgy-of-the-eucharist/the-real-presence-of-jesus-christ-in-the-sacrament-of-the-eucharist-basic-questions-and-answers.cfm>.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.intoleranceagainsthchristians.eu/index.php?id=12&case=2738>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.intoleranceagainsthchristians.eu/index.php?id=12&case=3332>

of Christ was touched, stolen. Which is for us a desecration. The real presence of Christ has been stolen. It's something strong," said the communications director of the Oise diocese.<sup>15</sup>

21. The church of Saint-Etienne in Tonny-Charente was desecrated on November 11, 2019. According to the Bishopric of La Rochelle, the cross of Christ was overturned, the tabernacle was broken, the hosts were scattered on the ground, the lunula containing a host for worship was stolen. The Bishop denounced "the deliberate desire to undermine the integrity of the consecrated hosts." Monsignor Georges Colomb, Bishop of La Rochelle and Saintes, denounced the violence as "an expression of hatred against Christ and his Church, a manifestation of violence, cowardice and stupidity." The Bishop of La Rochelle pointed out that this was not the first time that desecration had taken place in Charente-Maritime. "We have been witnessing this for some years now, our churches are beautiful, they are open to Christians," explained Monsignor Georges Colomb. The parishioners are shocked, for the whole Christian community, it is an affront, it is worse than a robbery because it is an attack on the Blessed Sacrament, it is the presence of the Lord, said Monsignor Georges Colomb.<sup>16</sup>
22. Just before an evening Mass on November 9, 2019, unidentified vandals entered the Tonny-Charente church and tore open the tabernacle of the altar of the Virgin Mary, breaking the doors. The consecrated hosts in the ciborium were thrown to the ground and the glass container holding a host consecrated for adoration was stolen. In addition, crosses were reversed and chairs and statues were broken, including one depicting St. Joseph holding the baby Jesus, which was decapitated by the perpetrators. The Bishop said, this was "desecration, not burglary." Bishop Georges Colomb, Bishop of La Rochelle et Saintes, said "This abject profanation is a painful wound and humiliation for all Catholics in the diocese".<sup>17</sup>
23. On January 31, 2016, unknown perpetrators entered the Bruyères-le-Châtel church and broke a window, overturned the tabernacle, stole the ciborium containing consecrated hosts, and sacked the sacristy. The bishop of Evry called it a "rampage." According to a parishioner, this was not the first time the church had been a victim, as graffiti had been found last year. However, this attack was much more serious. "Consecrated hosts were stolen. For someone who doesn't believe, this probably does not matter much. For [Catholics] it is the most serious. It is the body of Christ. It is Jesus who was attacked." For the bishop of Evry, "this is a real attack against the Catholic Church. It is the symbol of the sacred that has been affected. There is a will to do harm."<sup>18</sup>
24. During the night from September 25 to 26, 2016, one or more individuals broke into the church of Saint-Henri in Neuilly-Plaisance. Once inside, they stole the collection box containing donations to the church. They opened the tabernacle and threw the consecrated hosts on the floor. The attack shocked the Abbot, Nicolas Maine. "I'm

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.intoleranceagainsthchristians.eu/index.php?id=12&case=3012>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.intoleranceagainsthchristians.eu/index.php?id=12&case=3079>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.intoleranceagainsthchristians.eu/index.php?id=12&case=3090>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.intoleranceagainsthchristians.eu/index.php?id=12&case=1720>

devastated. Money is not the problem. However, the host is what is most sacred in the Catholic religion. The intention was clearly to violently attack this Christian place of worship. And two months after the assassination of Father Hamel, emotion remains strong in the Catholic community. To attack a church is to attack every Christian."<sup>19</sup>

#### Italy

25. On May 14, 2018, witnesses discovered that the tabernacle had been desecrated and two ciboria containing consecrated hosts had been stolen from the church of San Giacomo de Monselice. This was the 3rd robbery in the Padua diocese in five months. The vicar general of the diocese, Monsignor Giuliano Zatti, commented: "We are deeply saddened and even worried about a new theft affecting one of our Christian communities, that of San Giacomo of Monselice, where the tabernacle was desecrated and two ciborium containing the Eucharist were removed. This event, aggravated by the theft of the consecrated hosts, soon follows other acts of vandalism: in November, in the sanctuary of Tessara, where the stolen objects were later found, and in February in Ca' Morosini, where the tabernacle was profaned."<sup>20</sup>

#### Germany

26. The Bremen police published a press release about an unknown man who, in the afternoon of March 22, 2018, broke the lock of the tabernacle inside the convent chapel of the nuns of the Society "Ordo Sanctissimi Salvatoris" to steal the consecrated hosts that were kept inside, along with a monstrance (a liturgical object where the eucharistic forms are deposited and worshipped), a golden ciborium, and a small ornate bowl with water. In addition, the relics of St. Bridget of Sweden, founder of the Order, which were placed at the foot of the altar in a small box sealed by the Vatican, were also stolen. Mother Giovanna, who runs the community where nuns from Italy, Mexico, and India live, reported that it is precisely the theft of objects with lower financial value that caused the most damage and pain because of their religious value. The consecrated hosts, which hold incomparable value for any faithful Catholic, and the remains of the founder of the Order, were most painful to have lost.<sup>21</sup>

#### Spain

27. Before dawn on October 5, 2019, one or more intruders entered the 18th century Chapel of La Rosa in the Córdoba provincial town of Montilla through a side door. Once inside, they found the keys to the tabernacle, opened the pyx inside and scattered several hosts on the altar, according to the Rev. José Félix García, pastor of the parish of Santiago, to which the chapel belongs. Fr. García said that, "if we adopt the most charitable of hypotheses," the act was not malicious, but rather, a "sad and disagreeable incident." Even so, it was "serious and painful" because "they touched the most sacred thing that we Christians have, the body of Christ." The Civil

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.intoleranceagainsthchristians.eu/index.php?id=12&case=1885>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.intoleranceagainsthchristians.eu/index.php?id=12&case=2420>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.intoleranceagainsthchristians.eu/index.php?id=12&case=2327>

Guard investigated a possible offense against religious sentiments due to the profanation of a place of worship. Even if there were no intent to profane the chapel, Fr. García said the mere fact that the hosts were scattered on the altar constitutes a "clear and evident" act of disrespectful treatment that is not only punishable under Spanish law but also carries the pain of excommunication.<sup>22</sup>

28. On January 26, 2020, moments before the celebration of the evening Mass, unknown perpetrators removed the monstrance holding the consecrated host, a pyx (a small round container holding a consecrated host), and a ciborium with fifty consecrated hosts inside from the tabernacle of the Chapel of the Hospital Clínico Universitario de Valencia. The monstrance was later found in the chapel's confessional and dozens of consecrated hosts were discovered scattered on the street. The official reaction was a message from the Pastoral Sanitaria delegation which read: "In view of the very serious sacrilege of the Blessed Sacrament which occurred on Sunday afternoon in the Chapel of the Clinical Hospital, the Archbishop has ordered that the Chapel continue to be open for worship for the good of the holy people of God and that a solemn act of atonement be held there, as well as a solemn celebration in the Cathedral of Valencia, on dates to be announced. Let us pray to God to forgive such a grave sin and the conversion of all those involved. Praise be to the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar."<sup>23</sup>
29. On April 10, 2019, the Diocese of Málaga reported the theft of two ciboria containing consecrated hosts from the Iglesia de la Trinidad in Antequera. The diocese noted that apart from the fairly low value of the ciboria stolen, the theft of the hosts was a "desecration of extreme gravity that deeply offends the Catholic faith."<sup>24</sup>
30. Sometime between March 9 and 10, 2019, unknown persons entered the church of San Rafael Arnáiz (Sanchinarro) and caused extensive damage, including forcing open the tabernacle door and stole the ciborium after throwing consecrated hosts on the floor. According to the priest, the low economic value of the items stolen, coupled with their religious value, suggests that this was a hate crime against Catholics during Holy Week. The priest and parishioners were reportedly stunned to discover the desecration and some of the parishioners searched through the garbage to see if any of the consecrated hosts had been thrown there. The parish held Masses in reparation for the desecration.<sup>25</sup>

#### Consequences of Desecration, Theft, Vandalism

31. Many European churches have taken the decision to close their doors to the public, except during religious services, as a result of vandalism, theft, and desecration.
32. In churches across Europe, security has had to be increased as a result of vandalism, theft, and desecration. However, many communities cannot afford the financial burdens of purchasing security cameras and other equipment.

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.intoleranceagainstchristians.eu/index.php?id=12&case=3056>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.intoleranceagainstchristians.eu/index.php?id=12&case=3319>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.intoleranceagainstchristians.eu/index.php?id=12&case=2832>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.intoleranceagainstchristians.eu/index.php?id=12&case=2831>

33. Christians have resorted to organizing themselves to attempt to protect their churches. In France, for example, a group called “Protège ton Église” was founded in 2019 after a surge in incidents in January of that year.<sup>26</sup>

#### Conclusion

34. In the last ten years, churches across Europe have been the victims of theft, vandalism, and desecration at an alarming rate. Particularly of concern for Catholic churches is the phenomenon of theft and desecration of consecrated hosts. Despite clear pleas from priests, bishops, and parishioners to respect the sacred nature of consecrated hosts, the trend appears to be an increase in these incidents, rather than a reduction.

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<sup>26</sup> “‘Protège ton église’, entretien avec l’initiateur”, Vexilla Galliae, <https://www.vexilla-galliae.fr/actualites/protege-ton-eglise-entretien-avec-linitiateur/>.