

Investigation report

Emmaus International – Emmaus France – Abbé Pierre Foundation

This investigation report, drawn up by Caroline De Haas, Associate Director of Groupe Egaé, summarises the findings of the interviews and research she conducted.

Background to the request

On 9 February 2024, Emmaus International contacted Groupe Egaé to ask for support in conducting an investigation regarding possible acts of sexual violence allegedly committed by Abbé Pierre. This request followed a first-hand account originally received by Emmaus France, and subsequently shared with Emmaus International and the Abbé Pierre Foundation.

The methodology adopted was based on work carried out by the three Chief Executives of Emmaus International, Emmaus France and the Abbé Pierre Foundation.

Caroline De Haas, Associate Director of Groupe Egaé, interviewed 12 people between 10 April and 5 June 2024, as part of this investigation. Several different types of incidents emerged. An initial summary of the evidence gathered during these interviews was sent to Emmaus International, Emmaus France and the Abbé Pierre Foundation on 30 May 2024.

In accordance with the commitment made to those who agreed to share their testimony, this report is strictly anonymous. The names of those interviewed do not appear. Groupe Egaé reiterated to all of the people interviewed that the Emmaus movement was on hand to assist them if they so wished.

Reminder of the legal definitions

“Sexual harassment is the repeated imposition on a person of comments or behaviour of a sexual or sexist nature which either violates that person's dignity by being degrading or humiliating, or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive situation.” **Article 222-33 of the French Criminal Code**

“Sexual assault is any sexual violation committed with violence, coercion, threats or surprise or, in the cases provided for by law, committed against a minor by a person of legal age.” **Article 222-22 of the French Criminal Code**

Methodology

The Emmaus movement's decision to conduct an internal investigation was made after hearing an initial first-hand account from someone who was subjected to Abbé Pierre's behaviour. The purpose of the investigation was to assess the scale of the incidents and their nature.

To carry out this investigation, Groupe Egaé interviewed the individual whose testimony prompted the investigation, people who knew Abbé Pierre and could help Groupe Egaé with its investigation and other victims, identified during the course of the interviews.

The primary aim was therefore to give identified victims the opportunity to be heard and provide the Emmaus movement with sufficient information to decide what action to take.

On this basis, between March and June 2024, Groupe Egaé offered confidential and strictly anonymous interviews to identified individuals to gather their testimony in a safe environment.

The interview enabled those interviewed to talk about their experiences and their relationship with Abbé Pierre. They also talked about the incidents that they had been subjected to or of which they were aware. During each interview, Caroline De Haas asked the question: “Have you heard about other incidents?” or “Did you talk to other people about these incidents?” In many cases, the people interviewed had also heard other testimonies.

Some people provided additional information following the interviews.

Over the weeks, both during the interviews and in conversations with members of the Emmaus movement, new people were identified who had been subjected to acts of sexual violence by Abbé Pierre. They were, in turn, interviewed by Groupe Egaé.

When witnesses were present, Groupe Egaé tried, as much as possible, to interview them to corroborate the events. Some of them died a long time ago.

After conducting the interviews, Groupe Egaé drew up a report which provides a snapshot at a given date of the number of victims identified, the years when the incidents took place and their nature. It does not provide an exhaustive view of all the acts that could have been committed by Abbé Pierre.

Based on the information available to date, Groupe Egaé considers that there are probably other victims who have not yet been identified by the movement. The call for testimonies will enable us to offer them a place where they can be heard if they so wish.

The Emmaus movement’s request is of an exceptional nature. The length of time since the events occurred along with the death of the person in question 17 years ago complicate access to testimonies and prevent the adversarial principle from being applied.

Groupe Egaé was able to conduct its work independently of the organisations that commissioned the investigation, with their constant support, their active involvement in the process as well as guaranteed respect for the victims’ choice to remain anonymous when they wished.

Summary

In early July 2024, Groupe Egaé interviewed 12 people as part of an investigation, some of whom were not subjected to the acts. We also had access to two testimonies sent to someone at Emmaus International at the end of June 2024.

In total, Groupe Egaé received testimonies from 7 people reporting sexual violence suffered by women at the hands of Abbé Pierre over a period from the late 1970s until 2005.

Five people interviewed reported repeated behaviour. Two testimonies were sent to Emmaus International reporting similar behaviour (unrepeated). **One of the female victims stated that she was a minor when the first incident occurred (16 or 17 years old).**

The incidents reported include:

- Inappropriate behaviour of a personal nature
- A sexual proposition
- Repeated remarks with sexual connotations
- Unsolicited attempted physical contact
- Unsolicited touching of breasts

One of the people interviewed reported experiencing psychological difficulties throughout her life.

At least five additional individuals have been identified as having been subjected to acts of sexual violence without it being possible to interview them at this stage. Some people did not want to meet Groupe Egaé, others could not be contacted.

Several people were informed that Abbé Pierre behaved inappropriately towards women, without necessarily being aware of the actual violence committed. Some are now deceased and cannot be interviewed.

Investigation

The investigation conducted by Groupe Egaé highlights a number of factors.

- Seven people were identified as having been subjected to sexual violence at the hands of Abbé Pierre. The interviews held by Groupe Egaé brought back powerful emotions.
- At least five additional people were identified who may have suffered sexual violence perpetrated by Abbé Pierre.
- Several people were informed that Abbé Pierre behaved inappropriately towards women, without necessarily being aware of the actual violence committed.

Groupe Egaé documented various incidents during the investigation, identifying people with a variety of profiles over a period ranging from the late 1970s to the early 2000s. Our expertise at Groupe Egaé leads us to believe that there are undoubtedly other people affected, although it is difficult to estimate how many.

One of the findings of the investigation is that the incidents are similar from one person to another. Each story is unique, but similarities emerge as you read them. For example, several women testify to unsolicited physical contact with their breasts.

Facts brought to light as part of the investigation

Seven testimonies report sexual violence suffered by women at the hands of Abbé Pierre. One of the women stated that she was a minor when the incident occurred (16 or 17 years old).

Five people were interviewed and one submitted testimony via Emmaus International.

Two of the people interviewed said that they had been subjected to inappropriate behaviour of a personal nature that made them feel uncomfortable. One person described a sexual proposition that made them feel uncomfortable. One person described repeated remarks of a sexual nature that made them feel uncomfortable. Five people described unsolicited touching of a sexual area, three of them also suffered from unsolicited attempted physical contact. **One of them stated that she was a minor when the first incident occurred (16 or 17 years old).**

In order to facilitate an understanding of the incidents, the individuals will be referred to by letters A to G.

A. described several incidents of sexual violence from 1980 to 1988/1989.

A. reported having been touched several times on her chest when she was a minor in her family home where Abbé Pierre was regularly invited. She was between 16 and 17 years old. As a close family friend, he knew the children well and was admired by her parents.

In 1982, and now an adult, A. went to Italy at Abbé Pierre's request, accompanied by her little sister. She stated: *"He asked me to sit next to him in the car and held my hand the whole time. One day, he came into our bedroom without knocking".* On the return journey to Charenton, she testified to being forcibly kissed: *"on the last evening, when we were saying goodbye, he put his tongue in my mouth in a brutal and totally unexpected way".*

A. saw Abbé Pierre again in 1988 or 1989 in Mulhouse. She explained that he had asked to see her on his way to Switzerland. A. stated during the interview: *"I had to pick him up from the hotel. The porter told me, "He's waiting for you in his room". He was lying on the bed, he asked me to come and lie down. I told him, "No, no, let's go". He got up".* Abbé Pierre then had lunch with A. She stated that she was subjected to an attempt at physical contact, but she pushed him away.

In 2003, A. met Abbé Pierre, accompanied by her father. She had a meeting with Abbé Pierre and she read him a text telling him what he had put her through. A. stated that Abbé Pierre took the text and put it in the shredder. Abbé Pierre finally apologised at A's request.

One person we interviewed told us that he remembered this visit to Abbé Pierre. On leaving the office, A.'s father was quoted as saying, *"I think that Abbé Pierre will be very upset, as I was very hard on him, you understand, he behaved badly towards my daughter and I gave him a piece of my mind."*

B. testified that Abbé Pierre touched her breasts in the late 1970s and there was attempted sexual contact in 1992 at the Emmaus International headquarters when she was a staff member.

B. stated that between 1977 and 1980, "at the foot of the stairs, in between two sets of doors," as she and Abbé Pierre exchanged a few words, *"he started groping my left breast. I didn't react."*

In 1992, at the Emmaus International headquarters, B. was subjected once again to behaviour of a sexual nature in an office: *“I walked towards him to shake his hand. He tried to pull me towards the window. I said, “No, Father.” He said, “I need it.” I said, “No”. He left.”*

C. testified that she was touched twice in a sexual area while employed by Emmaus International. The incidents are alleged to have occurred around 1986-88, when C. was between 23 and 25 years old.

She stated: “I was with him in his office. We were discussing a document that I had typed (I was bringing it to him to sign). We got on very well. We could talk to each other easily, there was no sense of hierarchy, he was very approachable. While we were talking about work, he put his hands on my chest, on my breasts. It surprised me, but at the same time I didn’t dare say a word. I wasn’t expecting this act at all. I simply ended the conversation more quickly and left.”

C. added that Abbé Pierre repeated these acts: “On another occasion, not too long afterwards, while we were talking, he did the same thing again. I told him that it really bothered me and that it mustn’t happen again. It never happened again. I can’t remember if he apologised.”

D. testified that Abbé Pierre touched her breasts in 1995. She then received unsolicited personal messages from him.

D. was working on a documentary about Abbé Pierre, filmed in a community.

“At one point, I went over to remove his HF microphone. He put his hand on my breast. I took his hand and removed it. After that, I stopped going near him. I no longer wore light dresses. I paid attention. Afterwards, he kept writing to me, by letter, and phoning me. He said he wanted to come over. He was treading carefully as he was leaving a message on my answer machine. He tried several times. After one or two months, it stopped.”

D. stated that she reported it at the time to the community managers: “The couple met with us. They listened to what we had to say. They remained impassive. I thought to myself: “They’re protecting something. It’s unhealthy.”

E. stated that she was subjected to a number of acts of a sexual nature from 2002 to 2005, including unsolicited contact in a sexual area.

“In 2002, we were abroad, I remember that his hands moved very close to my body. He’d said dirty things like “the women in this country are very hot”, which I thought was strange.”

“I remember that I hid when he was around, I didn’t want to be near him at all. It was awkward for me during meetings of the Emmaus International Board, he would give me little notes saying, “sending you a big kiss”, I would blush, I was very uncomfortable. This happened twice. Once, he gave a greetings card to everyone and he said that he had a special one for me.”

“Once, in 2005, we were in Florence, he was in a wheelchair by then. When I went over to greet him, he touched both of my breasts.”

F. stated that she suffered unsolicited physical contact.

F. did not wish to be interviewed as part of the investigation. She told someone at Emmaus International about the incident, who reported it to the Egaé group whilst preserving her anonymity. The incidents described involved unsolicited physical contact, undoubtedly of a sexual nature. **These incidents took place in the late 1970s.**

G. testified that he touched her breasts in 2001

Emmaus International received a report from a member of an Emmaus group.

“The incidents took place in 2001, when Abbé Pierre visited our group. Abbé Pierre usually had to hold on to someone's arm to walk. A young woman, a volunteer in the group, had been appointed to help him. At one point, he took this girl's arm and took advantage of the situation to brush against her breasts.”

Findings from the interviews

The interviews held by Groupe Egaé brought back powerful emotions for those who were interviewed. Most of the victims were, and still are, involved in the movement and the work carried out by Abbé Pierre. The contradiction between Abbé Pierre's image, his desire for justice and equality and his behaviour towards women creates a major rift for people who admired him and his work.

One of those interviewed told Groupe Egaé: *“I normally defend myself. But this time it was God. What do you do when it's God who does that to you?”*

They all spoke of being shocked by the events.

They said: *“Did that really happen?”*, *“Did he realise?”*, *“It's Abbé Pierre, I can't do anything”*. Groupe Egaé noticed in some of the accounts a form of control fuelled by the age difference, Abbé Pierre's status and a kind of idolatry, or the subordinate relationship between him and those involved (proximity to the family, work).

One of the victims asked the movement to put a system in place to ensure that all those like her who may have been victims of this type of incident have the opportunity to be heard. This request was taken into account by the Emmaus movement, which agrees that this is needed and commissioned the Egaé group to conduct this investigation.

Other elements identified during the investigation

During the investigation, a number of allegations came to light suggesting that other people may have been subjected to sexual violence by Abbé Pierre.

Two of those interviewed during the investigation stated that people had confided in them about sexual behaviour by Abbé Pierre.

One person interviewed by Groupe Egaé reported having been told about an incident in the 1950s or 1960s. Abbé Pierre was in a boat with a woman and he allegedly *“jumped on her”*. The person

telling this story is said to have added: *“That was part of his character, we tried to control the damage.”*

Two books published about Abbé Pierre report behaviour similar to that described in the interviews¹.

A situation known to many

One person interviewed as part of the investigation, who knows the movement well, stated: *“A whole generation [those there from the start] knew that Abbé Pierre lost control”*. This person added: *“It was not an isolated occurrence”*.

In 1992, B. stated that she had been informed by managers at the time about Abbé Pierre’s behaviour. *“I spoke to them about it. It was in the office where Abbé Pierre had tried to block my way. They told me, “We thought that he’d calmed down”. They told me that I was not the only one of Emmaus International’s secretaries.”*

In 1995, D. said that she told the managers of a community.

In 2001, G. told several people from an Emmaus group about her experience.

After Abbé Pierre’s death, in 2007, one of the people interviewed heard accounts from Emmaus International’s secretaries. He said *“I believed them, I have no reason not to believe them. It’s unsettling to hear things like that. I didn’t talk about it.”*

One person interviewed said: *“I heard much later that the secretaries were warned to be careful around Abbé Pierre”*. He also recounted that a person close to Abbé Pierre had told him the following about Abbé Pierre, *“as he grew older, he struggled to control his instincts. He couldn’t stop himself from touching women’s breasts”*.

A staff member at the time stated that instructions were given to female colleagues not to go to see Abbé Pierre on their own. She said that she always went to see him together with at least one other colleague and that nothing ever happened.

¹* “Le saint et la pécheresse” by Sanda Slag and “L’abbé Père” by Jean-Christophe D’Escout