

ABOARD THE PAPAL PLANE -- Pope Francis said on Tuesday that the Roman Catholic Church had faced a persistent problem of sexual abuse of nuns by priests and even bishops, the first time he has publicly acknowledged the issue. # Catholic nuns have accused clerics of sexual abuse in recent years in India, Africa, Latin America and in Italy, and a Vatican magazine last week mentioned nuns having abortions or giving birth to the children of priests. But Francis has never raised the issue until he was asked to comment during a news conference aboard the papal plane returning to Rome from his trip to the United Arab Emirates. # " It's true, " Francis said. " There are priests and bishops who have done that. " # The pope's admission opens a new front in the long-running scandal of sexual abuse by priests, recognizing nuns who have tried for years to call attention to their plight. With the #MeToo movement going strong, and Francis under pressure for neglecting the victims of child abuse, the nuns' pleas have gained traction. # In November, the organization representing the world's Catholic women's religious orders, the International Union of Superiors General, publicly denounced the " culture of silence and secrecy " that contributed to abuse, and urged nuns to report abuse to law enforcement. # A top official in the Vatican office that handles sexual abuse allegations resigned last month after a former nun accused him of