

Flirty texts, Le Slap. Now Macron risks upsetting Brigitte yet again

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It is spring 2032 and Emmanuel Macron, at the age of 55, is hoping to achieve a feat no one before him has managed: to be elected French president for a third time. His wife, Brigitte, who has just celebrated her 79th birthday, is not at his side; she has withdrawn to the seaside to spend time with her seven grandchildren.

That, at least, is the scenario sketched out by Florian Tardif in a headline-grabbing biography of France's first couple, published last week. He believes that the president, after sitting out the next election in 2027, which he is constitutionally barred from contesting, will have another run at the job five years later – much to the displeasure of his wife, who, Tardif claims, is already weary of life in the Élysée Palace.

“It’s very human. You can’t

blame someone who is approaching 80 for wanting to live by the sea with a view of the beach, with rooms for the grandchildren,” said Tardif, 32, last week. As a political journalist for a TV news channel and latterly Paris Match magazine, he has been following the Macrons closely since 2018.

“And you also can’t blame someone in their fifties, who was president for ten years, for wanting to come back and try yet another gamble. In other words, I think they are both aware of this. For now, they aren’t talking about it – at least that’s what I’m told – but they prefer to tell themselves they will find a way of working it out.”

Tardif is sitting on the terrace outside Les Éditeurs, a literary café on the Left Bank in Paris, after a morning of interviews to promote his book *Un Couple (Presque) Parfait* – An (Almost) Perfect Couple. It was only released the day before but has

already shot to the top of the French bestseller list – in large part thanks to its take on a bizarre incident at Hanoi airport in May last year in which the first lady appeared to take a swipe at her husband as they prepared to disembark from the presidential plane.

Tardif claimed in a radio interview he had been told by multiple sources that the first lady was angry because she had caught sight of a message on her husband’s phone from Golshifteh Farahani, 42, a glamorous Franco-Iranian actress. He says the pair have a platonic relationship. The president, in turn, had allegedly been sending Farahani messages in which he praised her as *jolie* (pretty) and *magnifique* (magnificent).

“What hurt Brigitte was not so much the content of the message as what it suggested: a possibility, a door left slightly ajar on to a world she believed she controlled,” Tardif writes.

“She felt erased,” a friend of hers told him, “and by a much younger woman.”

What has become known to the French as *la gifle* – and to everyone else as Le Slap – has been picked over by the world’s media. Last month it was seized on by President Trump, angry at France’s refusal to join his war against Iran, to mock Macron as someone whose wife “treats him extremely badly”.

Tardif prefers to call it an “altercation” and says he discussed it with Brigitte when they met in March. She even showed him the move, which he, in turn demonstrates for me. He links his hands and stretches them gently out towards my face. It is not so much a slap as a face push, with two hands extended. “She said it is a gesture she uses often, including with her own children,” he told me, “often accompanied with a *ferme ta bouche* (shut up).”

The first lady was less



“La gifle” is administered to President Macron — allegedly after his texts to Golshifteh Farahani, right, were read



forthcoming about the reason for the episode, for which the Élysée Palace has given various conflicting explanations. After Tardif’s interview, a source close to the first lady denied his version of events. Several days later, Farahani was still yet to have commented.

Tardif, who says he has interviewed at least 40 people with professional and personal links to the couple for his new book, is sticking to his story. It would also not have been the first time, he says, that Brigitte had reacted angrily to a younger woman she felt was coming too close to her husband.

In his book he cites the example of a female intern, in her twenties – he calls her “Scheherazade” – who attempted, according to one official, “to use seduction to get what she wanted”: a job in the Élysée Palace. A close ally of the first lady told him that she had accelerated the

woman’s departure, just as years later, she would “get rid of another [female] adviser”.

Tardif says the reaction of his sources to the revelations in his book has been positive. They also seem to appreciate the way he has set out to humanise the president, who has long been saddled with a “robot-like image” by his advisers. Reaching for his phone, Tardif reads out a message he received from a former Macron aide, praising him for a “fairly accurate and successful portrait”.

Tardif is not surprised at the interest far beyond France in a relationship that began three decades ago when Brigitte Auzière, a French teacher and married mother of three, met a precocious student who began to court her. “There’s something almost novel-like about their story,” he said.

Macron, he believes, is something of a paradox: on the one hand, a moderniser who vowed to turn France

into “la start-up nation”, yet also a man who dreamt of being a writer and, like a character in a Balzac novel, was “very nostalgic for the past”. When they met, Brigitte, who had just turned 40, resembled the heroine of Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, one of her own favourite books, trapped in a “comfortable yet suffocating” marriage – in her case with a provincial banker she wed when she was 21.

The couple’s age difference is a recurring theme in the book and Tardif claims, in part because of this, Brigitte remains appalled by the prospect of her husband attempting another presidential run in 2032.

The idea has long been a matter of speculation. “All the major political figures of the Fifth Republic have tried a comeback,” Tardif said. “The only ones who didn’t were those truly prevented from doing so, by health problems, or who had died.”

‘They hug you, say they love you. Then the brainwashing begins’

Young women joining Spain’s Daughters of Merciful Love endure ‘exorcisms and coercive control’. Relatives accuse the Catholic Church of turning a blind eye

Katie Gatens Europe Correspondent
Los Molinos

A black crucifix marks the house. Behind the walls, on a suburban street in the village of Los Molinos, shielded by hedges and iron gates, dozens of young women live under strict control.

They dress like nuns, but are not. They belong to the Daughters of Merciful Love, or *Hijas de Amor Misericordioso* (HAM), a Catholic religious association – not an official order of the church – that has branches across Spain, in Madrid, Seville and Toledo, and a male equivalent.

Residents of Los Molinos, near Madrid, see the women walking to church twice a day. “They keep to themselves,” said one neighbour. “They have fixed smiles on their faces at all times. It looks like they’re in a trance.”

In July last year, the Daughters of Merciful Love was put under investigation by the Archdiocese of Madrid after “numerous complaints”. The Archdiocese found their activities had many of the attributes of a cult and limited those activities as a result, including banning them from admitting new members. HAM’s leader, María Milagrosa, known as “Marimi”, was removed by the cardinal of Madrid. Marimi was contacted for comment.

In recent weeks, about 40 alleged victims or relatives of women and men some of whom are still part of HAM have spoken to the Spanish media. They allege that within HAM there were “exorcisms” and food and sleep were restricted.

The Sunday Times met four alleged victims who claim to have suffered abuse including sexual, spiritual, physical, psychological and coercive control. Many live in fear of repercussions from the community. Names have been changed.

Victims and their families say the church’s measures do not go far enough. They claim abuse is continuing and put the responsibility squarely on the church, which they claim has allowed abuse to go unchecked for decades.

The Archdiocese of Madrid was approached for comment.

The Brothers of Merciful Love, the male chapter, is also under scrutiny by the church to determine whether it will be dissolved. Its 30 members wear a monk’s habit and are allegedly given tools of self-flagellation. The Sunday



BRUNO THEVENIN FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

Times met one former member who alleges he was coerced into a sexual relationship with a senior member.

The Daughters of Merciful Love was formed in 1983 by Father Antonio Mansilla, a Jesuit, in Seville. In June 2024, it was affirmed as a public association of the faithful by the Archbishop of Madrid, a step on the way to becoming an official religious order.

“This is very common in the Catholic Church, that before congregations are created, they function for a few years in an experimental way, as an association of faithful, until the authority of the church approves it,” said Luis Santamaria, founder of the Ibero-American Network for the Study of Sects (RIES).

Santamaria believes that HAM has exploited the backgrounds of some of its members – “family problems, breakups, the recent loss of a loved one,” he said. “The key to entering the HAM was not so much proper vocational discernment and spiritual accompaniment, but rather a rapid process with a certain degree of manipulation, doctrinally based on a double fear: eschatological fear, that end times are near and we are the group chosen by God, and fear of the Devil supposedly lurking around every corner.”

Miguel Perlado, a clinical psychologist who has worked with some of the victims and their families, said: “There are some elements which without any doubt show

us that there is a cult-like operation of this group, in the type of a sect.”

He identifies six elements of HAM that could be considered sect-like: a charismatic leader and the cult of personality; isolation and control of relationships and environment; invasion and manipulation of inner consciousness; deprivation – or continuous and systematic exhaustion; spiritual, physical and sexual abuse under mystical pretexts; and recruitment through a bombardment of love.

When all of her friends at school told her they were going to a weekend summer camp run by the Daughters of Merciful Love, “Maria” begged her parents to let her go too. “I loved it, the brothers and

sisters are young, they’re smiling, so nice, they hug you, tell you they love you,” she said.

Long days were taken up with prayer and confession. Co-ordinators encouraged the teenagers to share their darkest secrets, suffering and intimacies, in front of strangers. “It’s almost like a competition to share the worst,” said Maria.

Newcomers had phones and watches taken. Maria said she later realised they had been made to pray until about 3am before waking at 8am. She said: “You’re super tired and more vulnerable, emotional.” But she “loved” the retreat.

Quickly, all of Maria’s free time was spent within the community. “Every weekend, all the time, there are activities. That’s how they hook you in.” She says she became separated from friends and family. “They brainwash you.”

Members’ names are changed to a biblical name, chosen by Marimi. Relatives of members also began to observe that their loved ones “spoke of the family in very critical terms, even with suspicion and distrust,” Perlado said. “At the same time, they began to refer to Marimi as ‘mami’ or ‘mother’.”

With trembling hands, “Carmen” said her daughter, “Lucia”, was recruited in a similar way. One week, Lucia convinced her family to join her at Mass with HAM. “It looked like a sect,” said her mother. “Very exaggerated singing and praying. It

“If you try to leave they say you are being deceived by the Devil



María Milagrosa, centre, with members of the Daughters of Merciful Love. The group’s house in Los Molinos is marked with a crucifix

looked like they were drugged.”

Young men and women report quickly being made to feel special and told by senior members that they have a “calling” and have been “chosen” to join.

Some leave their studies and family homes and cut contact with friends to live within the group. Family visits are allowed once a month.

“Monica” left HAM about two years ago. “We had to ask permission to go outside,” she said. “When I told them I wanted to leave, they put me in isolation. If you try to leave, they say you are being deceived by the Devil.”

The structure of both male and female associations is hierarchical. Marimi is the “superior” and another superior brother and sister is in each house. “Marimi knows everything and decides everything,” said Monica. “And Marimi is never wrong.” All followers had a cross containing a lock of her hair. Perlado says that this behaviour is characteristic of a cult. “The devotees, the followers, carry small relics of Marini, for example, pieces of her clothes, or celebrate the birthday of the founder ... they address her as a mummy, which not only denaturalises the bond with the biological mother, but also instils an absolute dependence on the founder.”

Former members say inside the house there was one mobile phone for everyone to use, kept by the mother or brother superior, and all conversations were checked. Emails were first sent to a superior sister, who decided if they should then be delivered. All women had to wear a simple black habit and shirt.

Tools were given to members which

they could use to physically abuse themselves, Carlos, a former member of the Brotherhood, alleged. “They give you a spiked clice and a whip,” he said. They were expected to wear this, to irritate the skin, for an hour or more per day.

Brothers and sisters of HAM do not have jobs. Money is provided by donations. HAM relied on food banks and meals were allegedly restricted. “I lost 15kg in six months,” said Carlos.

The houses kept candles blessed by Father Antonio in anticipation of the end of the world. “We were the chosen ones, so that when the great punishment came, the end of the world, we would support the souls that would remain alive, because many would die,” said Monica.

Several victims report being given medication – including antidepressants – by those in charge.

Carlos also claims he was coerced into a sexual relationship with a senior figure. “Every night I went to bed and I asked God, ‘Tomorrow don’t open my eyes’.”

Santamaria says that among women he has counselled, “a significant number of the girls are taking psychiatric medication, and both among those still inside and those who have managed to leave, there are serious cases of psychosomatic manifestations resulting from the trauma they have experienced”.

Last year, when the church ordered the intervention and Marimi was removed, so too were 20 young women who had recently joined HAM.

Marimi is now thought to live between Mexico and Seville but allegedly continues HAM activities, coaching young people in person in Toledo.

“Where is the church in all of this?” said Monica. “People are still trapped inside, suffering. The church has a responsibility to care for them.”

Lucia is now living back at home, but Carmen said her daughter was still plagued by intrusive thoughts. “It’s been seven months since she left, and she still believes the Devil is punishing her.”

For more information, visit insulate-ukraine.org

How your £100,000 is helping Ukraine fix more broken windows

Christina Lamb Chief
Foreign Correspondent

A young British man on a quest to replace windows shattered by Russia across Ukraine has developed a simple kit that allows people to install their own panes in places too dangerous for his teams to reach.

Harry Blakiston Houston, from County Tyrone, Northern Ireland, has already replaced 80,000 windows destroyed by bombing. Now is able to patch up thousands more thanks to the generosity of Sunday Times readers.

The 29-year-old said he was overwhelmed to receive about £100,000 in donations to his organisation, Insulate Ukraine, after our feature last month about his work.

Blakiston Houston was a postgraduate student of engineering at Cambridge when he learnt that many of the millions of smashed windows across Ukraine were being covered up with chipboard, leaving residents cold and in the dark. He went back to his lab and devised cheap, shatterproof panes of “triple-glazed” polyethylene, or PET, which bends under

the pressure of an explosion rather than breaks like glass. They also provide insulation that he says is more efficient than double glazing.

In 2023 he set up a non-profit organisation and began installing windows across Ukraine in places where Russian attacks are so frequent there is no point in replacing windows with glass, but where thousands of civilians still live.

Although his windows are cheap and quick to install, the escalating use by Russia of first person-view drones to target people out in the open



ZACHARY TARRANT

Vladyslav fits a WindowKit pane at the station in Nikopol

has made some places too perilous to work in. So Blakiston Houston went back to his workbench and devised WindowKits: easy-to-assemble frames either pre-made or cut on-site using basic tools. The PET panels are then slotted in – no need for fiddly liquid sealant or specialist glazing equipment.

Last week he and his team oversaw their first self-fitted installation in Nikopol, southern Ukraine, a city that frequently comes under attack. Half its 100,000 residents have fled but many remain, often elderly people

with no place to go who fear losing their homes.

The first person to install a window was Serhi Serhiyovych Bolshoy, 64, a retired factory worker. He was delighted by the three panes he manoeuvred into place himself, having lived in a boarded-up flat since 2024 after the glass in his kitchen and living room was blown out. “It was dark day and night,” he said. “And cold.”

He was surprised at how easy it was. “I think anyone could handle this,” he said.

As he spoke, a pigeon flew up to the window – the first

bird Bolshoy had seen for two years. “I have guests,” he joked.

On Friday it was the turn of Tetiana and Vladyslav, who work in the train station, where all the windows have been boarded up since a Russian rocket strike on March 6. The time was 7.19pm – they know, because all the clocks stopped.

As the pair fitted two new windows in 40 minutes, Vladyslav was impressed: “It came together like Lego.”