

# Catholic Church in crisis over sexual abuse reports

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Shortly after reports of the first cases of sexual abuse by members of the Jesuit Order in the renowned Berlin Canisius College, new victims of Catholic institutions have come forward on an almost daily basis. Reports of these abuses have plunged the Catholic Church into a deep crisis worldwide.

The lawyer appointed by the Jesuit Order, Ursula Raue, said at the weekend that she knew of about 170 victims, including 59 former pupils of the Canisius College. Abuses by priests in the Jesuit Order were also carried out in the 1950s and 1960s. She did not give a precise figure for the number of those accused.

What is clear is that thousands of children and young people in Germany were victims of the Roman Catholic Church. Cases are also increasingly coming to light in other countries. Currently, the full extent of the abuse can only be the subject of speculation. But a report issued by a commission of inquiry in May 2009 in Ireland provides an estimate, documenting the mistreatment and abuse of 35,000 children in Irish religious institutions between 1914 and 2000.

The never-ending stream of reports about the abuse of mostly male children and teenagers by Catholic priests and officials behind church doors, in boarding schools and children's homes, in parishes and vestries, have breached the dam of silence imposed by the Church. Cases of sexual abuse in other public, private and church schools have now also been reported. The victims, many of whom had kept silent out of shame, fear for the consequences and because of the suffering caused by the trauma, have been encouraged by the media attention to break their silence. The decades of cover-up of these crimes by the respective institutions—especially the Catholic Church—has led to an outcry.

Representatives of the Vatican and politicians close to the Church have sought to use the reports implicating other institutions to divert attention from the scale of the abuse that took place within the Catholic Church. In particular, in Germany, cases of mistreatment at the Odenwald School in Hesse, known for its liberal approach to education, are being cited to claim that sexual abuse occurred in all sorts of institutions.

Some conservatives have even claimed that a liberal approach to education itself and the educational reforms of the 1970s were the cause for the abuse. The Hesse deputy state premier, Jörg-Uwe Hahn (Free Democratic Party, FDP), went so far as to make the absurd claim that the Social Democrats and Greens had “prepared the ground” for a climate of sexual abuse in the 1980s and 1990s.

Similarly, cases of sexual abuse reported in children's homes in the former East Germany, with the help of the crimes of the Stalinist regime, are being used to relativise the crimes of the Catholic Church.

Bishop Walter Mixa of Augsburg, an arch-conservative, blames the

abuse on the increasing sexualisation of public life, and claims that the level of abuse in Church institutions was “very small.”

Raniero Cantalamessa, preacher to the Papal household, has tried to portray the Catholic Church as a victim of a campaign. In a sermon on Good Friday, he compared the current situation with anti-Semitic persecution—a statement the Vatican subsequently had to retract.

These are transparent attempts to deflect attention from their own crimes and preserve the status quo of the Roman Catholic Church. In reality, the present crisis is shaking the Catholic Church to its foundations.

## The silence of the Vatican

This is why the history of abuse within the ranks of the Catholic Church has been covered up and suppressed by those in the very highest offices, including the Pope himself. According to the “Report Mainz” TV programme and the *Badische Zeitung*, the chairman of the German Bishops' Conference, Robert Zollitsch, while working as personnel officer in the Archdiocese of Freiburg in 1991—without informing the state attorneys—ordered the early retirement of a priest who was said to have abused at least 17 children and adolescents. The priest then committed suicide in 1995.

Former residents of children's homes have accused Bishop Mixa of physical mistreatment during his time as pastor at Schrobhausen. Mixa denies this.

The current Pope, Benedict XVI, while he was a cardinal, is said to have opposed the removal from office of a paedophile priest in California. A letter from 1985, signed by the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, expresses concerns about the consequences for the world church should the priest be removed from office. In 1978, the priest in question, Stephen Kiesler, had already been given a three-year suspended sentence for the sexual harassment of two boys. In 1981, once his sentence had expired, he asked to be released from the priesthood, and the diocese sent a letter to the Vatican. The case then sat in Rome for four years before Ratzinger replied to the bishop. Two more years passed before dismissal of the paedophile priest, during which the man worked with children.

The letter “De delictis gravioribus,” which Cardinal Ratzinger wrote in 2001, announced that the Vatican was assuming sole authority for cases of abuse—a blatant attempt to force the bishops into silence.

Until now, the Pope has kept a low profile. On March 19, he signed a pastoral letter directed towards the Irish congregation on the subject of sexual abuse. But he has said nothing about the cases in Germany. He also said nothing in his Easter message.

Meanwhile, a “round table” on the topic is planned in Germany. This will be chaired by Family Minister Kristina Schröder (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), Justice Minister Sabine Leutheusser-

Schnarrenberger (FDP) and Education Minister Annette Schavan (CDU). The first meeting of the 40-strong body is planned for April 23.

Its full title—"Sexual abuse in dependent and power relations in private and public institutions and within the family"—reveals that the Church has got its way on one question. The German Bishops Conference had vehemently rejected the original plan for a round table looking solely at abuse within the Catholic Church. The body will now be little more than another attempt by the Catholic Church to cover things up.

Church critic Uta Ranke-Heinemann doubts the round table will have any positive effects. In 1970, Ranke-Heinemann was the first woman in the world to gain a professorship in Catholic theology. The professor had to abandon her chair in 1987 because she expressed doubts about the virgin birth. For many years, she has been investigating cases of sexual abuse in the Church. In an interview with Zeit Online she said she feared that "such a round table in Germany would suffer a similar fate to the 'National Review Board,' established in 2002 to investigate allegations of abuse in the Church in America." After one year, its director, former governor of Oklahoma, Frank Keating, came to the conclusion, "This is not my Church, it's the Mafia, this is the Cosa Nostra." He then had to resign.

Ranke-Heinemann also recalled the case of the Cardinal of Boston, Bernard Francis Law. While he resigned in 2002 because of the constant transferring of paedophile priests and the concealment of abuse cases from the state authorities, "After that, however, he was given a high office in the Vatican."

## The sexual teachings of the Church

Critics both from within and around the Church believe the time has finally come to question Catholic sexual teachings, especially regarding celibacy. This they regard as the main reason for the recruitment problems of the Catholic Church. There is a dramatic shortage of priests in the Church, not only in Germany. According to these critics, lifting the celibacy rule would not only raise the prestige of the Catholic Church in the eyes of the population, but also attract more young people to become priests—ultimately saving the Church as an institution.

The critical clerical theologian Hans Kung wrote in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that celibacy was "the most important structural expression of a repressed attitude by the Catholic Church on sexuality, as is also expressed regarding contraception and other matters." For many centuries, bishops and others that professed the faith were married, Küng stressed. "Mandatory celibacy is the main reason for the catastrophic shortage of priests, the neglect of the Eucharist and the collapse in many places of personal pastoral care," he wrote.

Celibacy was imposed in the Middle Ages after centuries of discussions in the Church. One of the main reasons was economic. The Roman Church tried to prevent the decimation of ecclesiastical benefices administered by married priests through necessary payments for the subsistence of their family and through inheritance. The common practice in the Middle Ages of offices being passed from father to son also led to conflict with Rome. These conflicts were resolved in the interest of Rome through the affirmation of the requirement that priests be celibate.

To the present day, the Catholic Church relies on the theory of sexuality developed in the Middle Ages. In an article in *Tagesspiegel*, the head of the Berlin Canisius College, Father Klaus Mertes, was critical that the Catholic Church still suffered from homophobia and was far removed from real life when it came to the topic of sexuality.

Bishop of Trier Stephan Ackermann, recently given responsibility by the Bishops' Conference for dealing with cases of sexual abuse in the Church, conceded in an interview that one must pose the question "whether the priestly life attracts morbidly predisposed men or homosexuals in a special way." A "special vigilance in the qualifying examination" was called for, he said.

At the same time there is more to the current crisis of Catholic Church than the obligation of celibacy. Every aspect of the present crisis—the victims' plight, the disturbed sexuality of priests, the malice of Church officials in dealing with abuse—is indicative of a sick institution, whose practices and teachings run contrary to basic human needs, and inevitably create unhealthy psycho-sexual conditions.

The Catholic Church is an anachronism, a mockery of modern society. The bloated and corrupt church functionaries live like kings, rail against sin and vice, in which they themselves not infrequently indulge, oppose contraception and the right to abortion, condemn homosexuality, are enthusiastic about spiritual oppression and oppose science and rationality. Ever since Christianity arose from a revolutionary Jewish sect, becoming the state religion in the Roman Empire in the year 380, it has allied itself with the existing powers (in 1939 blessing the weapons of Hitler's armies) and making life a scourge for millions of people, who are supposed to console their miserable lives on earth with the heavenly paradise that comes after death.

This mass of social reaction and backwardness must necessarily be reflected in the personal relationships within the Church, and between priests and members of the congregation.

The prejudice against healthy sexual relations, the duty of celibacy, the thesis of the immaculate conception, the virgin birth, the nonsense of the Holy Trinity and other Catholic doctrines and dogmas are inextricably linked. It is virtually impossible to remove a single element without the entire edifice coming crashing down.

This is the deeper basis of the appalling involvement of the Roman Catholic Church in sexual abuse. It is a question of self-preservation. Church leaders would rather endanger the lives of the children and young people entrusted to them, placing their priests in hopeless situations and rejecting the realities of civilization, than risk the dissolution of the entire institution.



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