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Manchester, England — August 13, 2018
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The "appalling sexual abuse" of children as young as 7 was covered up in two leading Benedictine-run schools in England to protect the reputations of predatory monks, a government-backed investigation concluded.

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse said in a report published Aug. 9 that for decades there was a "culture of acceptance of abuse behavior" at Ampleforth Abbey, near York, and at Downside Abbey, near Bristol.

The report said the monasteries remained reluctant to report crimes to the police even after stringent child protection procedures were implemented in the Catholic Church in England and Wales following a series of high-profile clerical abuse scandals.

"Instead, monks in both institutions were very often secretive, evasive and suspicious of anyone outside the English Benedictine Congregation," Alexis Jay, who chaired the inquiry, said in a statement posted on the inquiry's website.

"Safeguarding children was less important than the reputation of the church and the well-being of the abusive monks," she continued. "Even after new procedures were introduced in 2001, when monks gave the appearance of co-operation and trust, their approach could be summarized as a 'tell them nothing' attitude."

The report revealed that 10 monks from both communities have been prosecuted for child abuse or for viewing child pornography.

Some teachers at schools run by the abbeys have been convicted of child abuse offenses and even a cleaner employed by Ampleforth abused at least 11 boys between 8 and 12 years old during the 1960s and 1970s.

One of the most notorious abusers at Ampleforth was Piers Grant-Ferris, a onetime priest known to students as "Pervy Piers," who began to sexually assault children nearly as soon as he joined teaching staff in 1966, the report said.

Grant-Ferris was convicted of 20 offenses against 15 boys. He died in 2015 at age 82.

At Downside, Fr. Nicholas White, a monk jailed for five years in 2012 for abusing boys, was allowed to continue teaching despite a student accusing him of sexual assaults, the report said.

Ampleforth College and Downside are among the most prestigious Catholic independent schools in the United Kingdom. Cardinal Basil Hume was the abbot of Ampleforth before he was appointed archbishop of Westminster in 1976. He died in 1999.

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The inquiry said both institutions viewed child protection reforms as "neither obligatory nor desirable" and said an executive summary in the report, that the Catholic Church failed to act when the reforms were ignored.

The inquiry also was critical of the burning of the personal records of the monks and teaching staff at Downside in a bonfire of 2012, ostensibly to create storage space.

"It is impossible to say whether these files contained either potentially incriminating information or, indeed, information which could have enabled victims to have a

better understanding of what had happened to them," the report said. "Regardless of the motivation for the destruction of these records, it adds to the perception of cover-up on the part of Downside."

Fr. Christopher Jamison, abbot president of the English Benedictine Congregation, which represents 10 monasteries, including Ampleforth and Downside, welcomed the report and said he would continue to cooperate with the inquiry.

"Once again I apologize unequivocally to all those who were abused by any person connected with our abbeys and schools," he said in the statement published on the congregation's website. "The report highlights how flawed many of our past responses have been. We continue to work conscientiously to ensure our communities are safe environments for young people both now and in the future."

An Aug. 9 statement emailed to Catholic News Service by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales said the church is "fully committed to the safeguarding of all children and adults at risk."

"All sexual abuse of children and vulnerable adults is both criminal and harmful," the statement said. "The church condemns without reservation any such crimes and the perpetrators of these crimes must be brought to justice."

A report on a third English Benedictine school and abbey is expected to be published by the inquiry in 2019.