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Then-Archbishop Joseph Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict XVI, is pictured in this fil

Then-Archbishop Joseph Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict XVI, is pictured in this file photo May 28, 1977. (CNS photo/KNA)



by Catholic News Service

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In mid-January, the law firm Westpfahl Spilker Wastl is scheduled to publish a report into the handling of clerical sexual abuse in the Archdiocese of Munich and Freising.

The potentially explosive aspect is that three of the highest-ranking officials are still alive: Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger — now retired Pope Benedict XVI — and Cardinals Friedrich Wetter and Reinhard Marx, reported the German Catholic news agency KNA.

The investigation followed two years of research and covers the period from 1945 to 2019, centering on who knew what about sexual abuse and when, and what action they took, if any, KNA reported.

Much of the public interest is focused on the retired pope's 1977-1981 tenure as archbishop of Munich. The case concerns the assignments of a priest accused of a particularly large number of offenses.

In early summer 2021, Cardinal Marx — the current archbishop of Munich — tried to resign from office to take responsibility — explicitly also for possible mistakes of his

predecessors. Pope Francis rejected his request.

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Peter H. came from the Diocese of Essen in 1980 to undergo therapy in Bavaria after he had already committed abuse as a chaplain. But he was soon reassigned to providing pastoral care — and reoffended. There are now 29 victims on record in Munich and Essen, and it is said the number could be even higher.

Even when Peter H. received a suspended sentence in 1986, senior church officials again assigned him to a parish.

He was not removed from pastoral care until 2010. He currently lives in the Essen Diocese, where he is subject to restrictions. A church law case against the cleric is about to end, according to the Essen Diocese communications office.

In 2010, Father Gerhard Gruber, who was Munich vicar general in 1980, took sole responsibility for Peter H. being allowed to resume his work as a priest under Archbishop Ratzinger. That exonerated then-Pope Benedict XVI. Father Gruber later told a friend he was forced to sign a statement taking responsibility; church officials denied that and said he only was assisted in writing his statement.