News

Pope Benedict XVI greets an estimated 600,000 youths while standing in front of a huge portr

Pope Benedict XVI greets an estimated 600,000 youths while standing in front of a huge portrait of Christ in Krakow, Poland, May 27, 2006. (CNS/OSV News/Reuters/Max Rossi)

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The surviving relatives of the late Pope Benedict XVI stand to inherit money from his legacy, according to the executor of his last will and testament. None of these relatives seem willing to touch it.

One cousin has already refused to accept the inheritance; four others have not yet responded. If they are smart, they will turn it down as well.

The problem is that, by accepting the money, an heir also takes over any legal claims against the deceased, according to estate laws in Germany, where the cousins all live. Joseph Ratzinger, as he was known before adopting his papal name, is a defendant in one of the most-watched cases of clerical sexual abuse in the

country.

"We didn't expect this inheritance, and our lives are just fine without it," said Martina Holzinger, the daughter and legal guardian of a now 88-year-old Ratzinger cousin who has refused the unexpected gift.

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When the retired pope died at age 95 on Dec. 31, 2022, his longtime assistant, Archbishop Georg Gänswein, got to work as executor of the will. "Gorgeous George," as the Clooney-double was known among Vatican journalists, duly went about contacting the few first cousins still alive.

Without even knowing how much the inheritance would be, the prospect of taking on the scandal that darkened Ratzinger's legacy was too much. "I could get the shakes just thinking about how much I would have to pay out," she told Bavarian Radio.

The former pope's problems began in 1980, when he was archbishop of Munich, and the Rev. Peter Hullermann was transferred to the Bavarian state capital from Essen. Hullermann had been accused of eight cases of abusing children in Essen, but while Munich was informed of his record, the public was not.

After some therapy — the church's accepted response at the time — Hullermann was sent back into normal ministry near Munich, with no mention of his past problems. That gave him access to minors once again, and by 1986 he received an 18-month suspended sentence from a local court for sexually abusing 11 boys.

Then the priest was sent to Garching an der Alz, near the Austrian border, and the abuse continued. In 2008, he was transferred again, to Bad Tölz, a spa town south of Munich. There, in 2010, he was suspended as a priest and finally defrocked in 2022.

The former pope denied knowing about Hullermann until January 2022, when a report on sexual abuse in the Munich archdiocese showed he had attended a 1980 meeting about Hullermann's transfer and approved it.

Retired Pope Benedict XVI speaks to his private secretary, Archbishop Georg Gänswein, at Ge

Retired Pope Benedict XVI speaks to his private secretary, Archbishop Georg Gänswein, at Germany's Munich Airport before his departure to Rome June 22, 2020.

(CNS/Sven Hoppe, pool via Reuters)

The report, ordered by the archdiocese itself, accused him of probably lying to the investigators. They concluded Ratzinger had failed to act in four separate abuse cases.

Days later, his personal secretary, Gänswein, said Ratzinger now remembered attending the Hullermann meeting and blamed the omission on "an oversight in the editing of the statement."

Two months after his death, Bavarian Radio reported the Hullermann case had also followed Ratzinger to Rome, where he became an influential adviser to Pope John Paul II in 1982.

A 1986 letter he wrote gave Vatican permission for the wayward priest to celebrate Mass with grape juice rather than wine because he was an alcoholic.

Amid these revelations, Andreas Perr, now 39, spoke up to claim he had been sexually abused by Hullermann in the 1990s in Garching an der Alz.

Since criminal charges were beyond the statute of limitations, Perr filed a civil suit for 50,000 euros in damages from the heirs and another 300,000 euros from the Munich Archdiocese. In addition, he asked the defendants to pay any future costs resulting from the abuse.

His petition listed the consequences of his abuse as "traumatic nightmares, flashbacks and symptoms of avoidance related to repressing the stressful memories of the violent event."

All this would not be so complicated if Benedict had not stepped down in 2013, the first pontiff to resign in six centuries. Normally, a pope who dies in office leaves everything to the Holy See, the central government of the Roman Catholic Church.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the future Pope Benedict XVI, gives a lecture in New York in Januar

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the future Pope Benedict XVI, gives a lecture in New York in January 1988. (CNS/KNA)

"Papa Ratzinger," as the Italians called him, earned royalties from the many books he wrote and salaries from universities where he was a theology professor. He also had a comfortable income during his time as archbishop of Munich.

In his initial letter to Ratzinger's cousins, Gänswein revealed neither how much money was at stake nor how many cousins survived to share it. He also made clear that neither book royalties nor personal items were part of the package.

Talking to journalists in March, he revealed that there were five cousins and that among them they stood to inherit "what might still be in the bank account." It sounded like it might be a small sum.

But nobody knows what those future costs arising from abuse will amount to. The Munich Archdiocese has further complicated the issue by saying it was ready to pay "compensation for the suffering of the plaintiff and to find an appropriate solution for any damage claims that go beyond this."

"It's like in the movies," a bewildered Holzinger, the first Ratzinger relative to come forward, said of the inheritance case.

"I work at a school myself, so children are very important to me. I'm really interested that these things are cleared up and that any plaintiffs get their rights."