

Scandal takes familiar trajectory in Germany

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 3, 2010



Bishops arrive for the opening of the annual meeting of the German bishops' conference in Freiburg Feb. 22. (CNS photo/Johannes Eisele, Reuters)

In James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus famously describes history as "a nightmare from which I am trying to awake." Catholic leaders in Rome and around the world may have the same sensation about the sexual abuse crisis -- just as it seems about to crest in one spot, it erupts anew somewhere else.

Fresh proof of the point came in mid-February, as sensational media reports of sexual abuse flared up in Germany just as the Irish bishops left for Rome for a Feb. 16-17 summit with Vatican officials to discuss the crisis gripping their nation ([see Story](#) [1]).

Though in many ways the German storyline seems to be following a trajectory already familiar from scandals elsewhere, it has at least two noteworthy features:

- It is the first such crisis in a large nation outside the English-speaking world;
- Pope Benedict XVI served as archbishop of Munich from October 1977 to February 1982 -- within the arc of time that some of the alleged abuse is believed to have occurred.

The German scandal began with revelations focused on an elite Jesuit academy in Berlin, Canisius College, where the principal acknowledged that several ex-students had accused two Jesuit priests of sexual abuse, with the cases dating from the 1970s and 1980s. According to an attorney appointed by the Jesuits to review the charges, more than a hundred accusers have subsequently come forward to allege abuse at Jesuit schools in Berlin, Hamburg and the Black Forest. There have also been similar charges at other church-affiliated institutions.

From there, the story went national.

Germany's leading newsmagazine, *Der Spiegel*, conducted a survey of German dioceses, published Feb. 8, that

found that at least 94 priests and lay employees of the Catholic church are suspected of having abused an unknown number of children and adolescents. According to reports, the allegations generally involve charges of groping or spanking semi-naked children, as well as some nonsexual forms of abuse, including harsh physical punishment.

Though at least some of those acts would be crimes under German law, in many cases, according to reports, the country's 10-year statute of limitations for prosecution has already elapsed.

Though *Spiegel's* report may have been reasonably sober, the presentation was obviously explosive: The magazine's cover art showed a Catholic clergyman with a Bible in one hand while his other hand appeared to be fondling himself, under the headline, "The Hypocrites: The Catholic Church and Sex."

The *Spiegel* account charged that the Catholic church "repressed and covered up sexual abuse in its own ranks for decades -- and in doing so enabled pedophile priests to leave behind a trail of emotional devastation throughout Germany."

Archbishop Robert Zollitsch of Freiburg, president of the German bishops' conference, issued a public apology for the scandal Feb. 22, asking forgiveness in the name of the German Catholic church.

Zollitsch denounced the sexual abuse of minors as a "heinous crime," and pledged to investigate all cases, to cooperate with prosecutors, and to review procedures for preventing abuse and for dealing with it when it occurs. The German bishops currently have a policy that dates from 2002, crafted in response to the crisis in the United States, that requires church authorities to appoint an independent investigator to review all charges of sexual abuse. Critics, however, say its provision for reporting cases to the police and civil prosecutors is ambiguous.

Zollitsch vowed to raise the crisis with the pope in a meeting in Rome in March, and also voiced concern for its impact upon German Catholics, acknowledging that it may be "shaking their faith and threatening their capacity to trust in God."

Those pledges, however, have not been enough to satisfy some critics. Germany's justice minister, Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger, recently told reporters in late February that the country's bishops "have not shown an active interest in a truly uninhibited and thorough investigation."

According to reports in the German media, Zollitsch phoned German Chancellor Angela Merkel to object, calling the comments by Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger the "gravest attack" on the Catholic church by a public official in decades. A Merkel spokesperson later said the government "does not doubt the commitment of the church to investigate sexual abuse of children by priests and to prevent it recurring," but Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger continued to insist on greater cooperation with the police.

Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger also said she would meet with Zollitsch to discuss the situation.

That crossfire, according to German observers, may further complicate what was already a tense relationship between the Catholic church and Merkel's government. Historically the church has been close to her party, the Christian Democratic Union, but some German Catholics objected when Merkel, a Lutheran, publicly criticized Pope Benedict XVI last year for his decision to lift the excommunications of four traditionalist bishops, including one who has minimized the Holocaust.

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR* senior correspondent. His e-mail address is jallen@ncronline.org.]

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