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Papal silence on crisis troubles German Catholics

by Kate Connolly



Students practice for a Christmas concert at the Regensburger Domspatzen in Regensburg, Germany, last Nov. 27. The boarding school trains the elite boys' choir of the Regensburg Cathedral. Authorities were investigating claims of sexual abuse that may have occurred decades ago at the school. (CNS photo/KNA-Bild)

BERLIN -- German Catholics have called on Pope Benedict XVI to speak out about a stream of sex abuse cases that have shocked the country and plunged the church into its biggest crisis in over six decades.

Pope Benedict has become personally embroiled in the affair, after it emerged that while he was archbishop of Munich and Freising in southern Germany in 1980, a priest accused of sexual abuse in another diocese had been transferred to the area, sent for therapy, and then placed in a parish where he went on to commit other acts of abuse.

The vicar general of the archdiocese from that era has assumed ?full responsibility? for the decision, saying there were more than 1,000 priests in Munich at the time and that then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was not informed.

Those close to the pope say that dredging up the case now is the work of "vicious elements" who have long wanted to find a connection between the pontiff and the sex abuse crisis. For example, Italian Archbishop Rino Fisichella, who heads the Pontifical Academy for Life in Rome, called attempts to "draw in" Benedict XVI to the crisis a "sign of violence and barbarity".

As German Catholics ask to what extent the pope might have known about specific cases of abuse, the affair is likely to cast a shadow over celebrations next month to mark the fifth anniversary of the election of the first German to the papacy in 500 years.

On Monday, the priest who had been transferred into Munich on Ratzinger's watch, named in media reports as Peter Hullermann, now 62, was suspended, after reports that he continued to work as a parish priest a full 25 years after a 1986 conviction for sexual abuse. The same day, an official of the Munich archdiocese with responsibility for priests' assignments resigned over the affair. Monsignor Josef Obermaier said he had "failed in his duty".

At Hullermann's most recent parish in Bad Tölz, Bavaria, where he had served since 2008, the mood at last Sunday's mass was one of disbelief, as churchgoers discovered for the first time that their priest was at the center of the row. During a sermon being given by an interim priest, a young man who was soon due to be married by Hullermann reportedly stormed the pulpit and shouted that he had just discovered the truth about the priest's past.

Parishioners, who had not previously been informed, were in a visible state of shock. Some wept, while others left the building.

See related story: **[Munich archdiocese official resigns](#)**

The anger has not been confined to Bad Tölz. The sex abuse scandal in Germany has affected 19 of the country's 27 dioceses, with new accusations emerging daily from everyone from former school pupils of Catholic boarding schools to members of church choirs. Some have talked of abuse that went on for years, pointing fingers of accusation at teachers and priests. Among those who have broken their silence and come forward are German politicians, business people, writers, and composers.

A Berlin attorney hired by the Jesuit order in the German capital to handle complaints, has so far been contacted by 200 people with stories of abuse, while at the monastery school in Ettal, close to the world-famous passion play town of Oberammergau, 150 people have reported cases.

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At a renowned boys' choir in Regensburg, the *Domspatzen*, 15 former choir boys have come forward to allege various forms of abuse. That choir was directed for 30 years by the brother of Pope Benedict, Monsignor Georg Ratzinger, who has conceded that he occasionally slapped choir boys in the face as part of the more robust physical discipline of the era.

Many German Catholics were expecting a response from Pope Benedict last Sunday during his Angelus prayers in St. Peter's Square in Rome. His failure to address the issue was received with huge disappointment.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, a Munich-based daily, noted: "The pope always finds words ahead of his weekly Angelus prayers to talk about current affairs. On this cool Lenten Sunday Benedict XVI spoke

about the allegory of the Prodigal Son. But this time there was no mention from him about the abuse cases that are rocking his church.?

Dirk Tänzler, chairman of the Union of German Catholic Youth, called on the pope to make a statement.

?It is of great concern to people, whether they're religious or not, and the Holy Father should speak out about this,? he said.

The clamor of voices urging Benedict to speak is becoming ever louder, and commentators are convinced the longer he remains silent, the more damaging the affair will be for the German Catholic church.

Tänzler added that the pope has an obligation to speak, not least because the affair has ?plunged the German Catholic church, from where he himself comes, into its deepest crisis since 1945.? He was referring to the end of the Second World War, when the church was called to account for the role it played in trying to prevent the Holocaust.

This week a survey by the pollsters Enmid indicated that the fallout over the latest scandal could have widespread and long-lasting consequences. Seventy-one percent of Germans said that the cases had damaged the church?s credibility, while only 22 percent disagreed. Amongst Catholics, 67 percent were of the opinion their church has lost credibility.

The scandals have also sparked a perhaps inevitable, but passionate, debate in Germany about celibacy and the possibility of married priests.

Auxiliary Bishop Hans-Jochen Jaschke of Hamburg has been the first prominent German Catholic leader to speak out in favor of allowing both celibate and married priests, and said priests needed to develop a more relaxed attitude about sexuality.

?You need to experience yourself as a sexual being,? Jaschke told *Die Welt* daily, adding his fears that ?the celibate way of life can act as a pull for those who have a warped sexuality? to join the priesthood.

The president of the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK), the most important lay body in Germany, said the church found itself in a crisis and needed a ?complete overhaul? in its thinking.

?The church needs to reflect whether it?s not something specific about its structure that has made abuse easier,? Alois Glück said.

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Meanwhile experts in sexual abuse have recommended setting up a hotline for priests who want to discuss issues of sexuality, or who fear they have pedophile tendencies.

[Kate Connolly is the Berlin correspondent for the U.K.-based *Guardian* newspaper.]

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