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Ratzinger's Responsibility

by Hans Kung



Hans Kung (CNS)

After Archbishop Robert Zollitsch's recent papal audience, he spoke of Pope Benedict's "great shock" and "profound agitation" over the many cases of abuse which are coming to light. Zollitsch, archbishop of Freiburg, Germany, and the chairman of the German Bishops' Conference, asked pardon of the victims and spoke again about the measures that have already been taken or will soon be taken. But neither he nor the pope have addressed the real question that can no longer be put aside.

According to the latest Emnid-poll, only 10 percent of those interviewed in Germany believe that the church is doing enough in dealing with this scandal; on the contrary, 86 percent charge the church's leadership with insufficient willingness to come to grips with the problem. The bishops' denial that there is any connection between the celibacy rule and the abuse problem can only confirm their criticism.

1st Question: Why does the pope continue to assert that what he calls "holy" celibacy is a "precious gift", thus ignoring the biblical teaching that explicitly permits and even encourages marriage for all office holders in the Church? Celibacy is not "holy"; it is not even "fortunate"; it is "unfortunate", for it excludes many perfectly good candidates from the priesthood and forces numerous priests out of their office,

simply because they want to marry. The rule of celibacy is not a truth of faith, but a church law going back to the 11th Century; it should have been abolished already in the 16th Century, when it was trenchantly criticized by the Reformers.

Honesty demands that the pope, at the very least, promise to rethink this rule -- something the vast majority of the clergy and laity have wanted for a long time now. Both Alois Glück, the president of the Central Committee of the German Catholics and Hans-Jochen Jaschke, auxiliary bishop of Hamburg, have called for a less uptight attitude towards sexuality and for the coexistence of celibate and married priests in the church

2nd Question: Is it true, as Archbishop Zollitsch insists, that "all the experts" agree that abuse of minors by clergymen and the celibacy rule have nothing to do with each other? How can he claim to know the opinions of "all the experts"? In fact, there are numerous psychotherapists and psychoanalysts who see a connection here. The celibacy law obliges the priest to abstain from all forms of sexual activity, though their sexual impulses remain virulent, and thus the danger exists that these impulses might be shifted into a taboo zone and compensated for in abnormal ways.

Honesty demands that we take the correlation between abuse and celibacy seriously. The American psychotherapist Richard Sipe has clearly demonstrated, on the basis of a 25 year study published in 2004 under the title *Knowledge of sexual activity and abuse within the clerical system of the Roman Catholic church*, that the celibate way of life can indeed reinforce pedophile tendencies, especially when the socialization leading to it, i.e. adolescence and young adulthood spent in minor and major seminary cut off from the normal experiences of their peer groups, is taken into account. In his study, Sipe found retarded psycho-sexual development occurring more frequently in celibate clerics than in the average population. And often, such deficits in psychological development and sexual tendencies only become evident after ordination.

3rd Question: Instead of merely asking pardon of the victims of abuse, should not the bishops at last admit their own share of blame? For decades, they have not only tabooed the celibacy issue but also systematically covered up cases of abuse with the mantle of strictest secrecy, doing little more than re-assigning the perpetrators to new ministries. In a statement of March 16, Bishop Ackermann of Trier, special delegate of the German Bishops' Conference for sexual abuse cases, publically acknowledged the existence of such a cover-up, but characteristically he put the blame not on the church as institution, but rather on the individual perpetrators and the false considerations of their superiors. Protection of their priests and the reputation of the church was evidently more important to the bishops than protection of minors. Thus, there is an important difference between the *individual* cases of abuse surfacing in schools outside the Catholic church and the *systematic* and correspondingly more frequent cases of abuse within the Catholic church, where, now as before, an uptight, rigoristic sexual morality prevails, that finds its culmination in the law of celibacy.

Honesty demands that the chairman of the German Bishops' Conference should have clearly and definitively announced, that, in the future, the hierarchy will cease to deal with cases of criminal acts committed by those in the service of the church by circumventing the state system of justice. Can it be that the hierarchy here in Germany will only wake up when it is confronted with demands for reparation payments in terms of millions of dollars? In the United States, the Catholic church had to pay some \$1.3 billion alone in 2006; in Ireland, the government helped the religious orders set up a compensation fund with a ruinous sum of \$2.8 billion. Such sums say much more about the dimensions of the problem than the pooh-poohing statistics about the small percentage of celibate clergy among the general population of abusers.

4th Question: Is it not time for Pope Benedict XVI himself to acknowledge his share of responsibility, instead of whining about a campaign against his person? No other person in the Church has had to deal with so many cases of abuse crossing his desk. Here some reminders:

- In his eight years as a professor of theology in Regensburg, in close contact with his brother Georg, the capellmeister of the Regensburger Domspatzen, Ratzinger can hardly have been ignorant about what went on in the choir and its boarding--school. This was much more than an occasional slap in the face, there are charges of serious physical violence and even sexual abuse.
- In his five years as Archbishop of Munich, repeated cases of sexual abuse at least by one priest transferred to his Archdiocese have come to light. His loyal Vicar General, my classmate Gerhard Gruber, has taken full responsibility for the handling of this case, but that is hardly an excuse for the Archbishop, who is ultimately responsible for the administration of his diocese.
- In his 24 years as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, from around the world, all cases of grave sexual offences by clerics had to be reported, under strictest secrecy ("secretum pontificum"), to his curial office, which was exclusively responsible for dealing with them. Ratzinger himself, in a letter on "grave sexual crimes" addressed to all the bishops under the date of 18 May, 2001, warned the bishops, under threat of ecclesiastical punishment, to observe "papal secrecy" in such cases.
- In his five years as Pope, Benedict XVI has done nothing to change this practice with all its fateful consequences.

Honesty demands that Joseph Ratzinger himself, the man who for decades has been principally responsible for the worldwide cover-up, at last pronounce his own "mea culpa." As Bishop Tebartz van Elst of Limburg, in a radio address on March 14, put it: "Scandalous wrongs cannot be glossed over or tolerated, we need a change of attitude that makes room for the truth. Conversion and repentance begin when guilt is openly admitted, when contrition is expressed in deeds and manifested as such, when responsibility is taken, and the chance for a new beginning is seized upon."

[Fr. Hans Küng is a theologian and author of many books, including *Does God Exist: An Answer for Today and Infallible?: An Inquiry.*]

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