

U.S. survivors take stories to Europe

Thomas C. Fox | Apr. 12, 2010



Barbara Blaine center, speaks to German reporters in Munich March 22 as Barbara Dorris looks on. (NCR photo/Thomas C. Fox)

MUNICH, GERMANY -- When Barbara Blaine and Barbara Dorris, U.S. sex abuse survivors, showed up last month at the front gate of the archbishop's office here, they quickly attracted eager members of the German media, still in their relative infancy in covering the scandal and wondering what to make of the women.

Blaine is president of the Saint Louis-based Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, known as SNAP, and, in that capacity, has had many years' experience working with reporters, explaining her story of abuse: child molested by a priest in Toledo, Ohio; memory of the abuse that erupted in a flashback in 1985 reading an article about abuse in the *National Catholic Reporter*; trauma and frustration that followed; and finally the re-empowerment that came with going public.

The German media, including some who were interviewing an abuse survivor for the first time, gave the women their full attention, asking many questions.

Blaine possesses considerable tenacity and patience. She answered each question carefully and never blinked when a woman emerged from Archbishop Reinhard Marx's office to berate her for having come there in the first place.

That brief confrontation seemed symbolic of the uneasy nature of the relationship, going back decades now, of abuse survivors and their church's prelates. One of the darkest aspects of the story has been the pattern -- lessening in recent years -- among church officials to protect the predator by blaming and scolding the victim.

When Pope Benedict XVI came to the United States in April 2008 he met personally with survivors, extending himself as a symbol of comfort and contrition. The meeting helped set a new course and relationship. Nevertheless, the lasting -- and damning -- church record has more often been one of legal antagonism than human solace.

As the women addressed the dozen media members March 22, standing on the sidewalk along a narrow street, they carefully placed several dozen photographs of children, all abused by priests, along the iron fence in front

of the archbishop's office. For some in the German press, it was the first time they could match the story they were covering with actual faces of abuse victims. Most of the photos depicted survivors as they looked about the time they were abused. Dorris held a photo of taken of her at her first Communion.

The women were on the first leg of a quickly arranged multi-European city pilgrimage through Germany, Austria and Italy. At each stop they attempted to reach out to other abuse victims. In Rome in front of the Vatican March 25, they were briefly arrested by Italian police for holding a news conference without a permit.

While here in Munich, they called for an independent government probe into the clergy sex abuse scandal just about the time the German government was beginning to offer promises to get more involved.

By nature, Germany is a conservative country. It has not been easy or common for abuse survivors to come forward. So what has been happening here since early January has broken social norms, making the story all the more shocking to the German populace, about a third of which is Catholic.

In some ways, the atmosphere for victims of sexual abuse here today is somewhat similar to what it was like some two decades back in the United States, when victims initially viewed themselves as isolated cases -- until they learned they were not.

"There doesn't seem to be an environment here where victims feel safe or free to speak up," Blaine said. She used the media to spread word that victims need to come together and draw strength from each other.

Their previous isolation no longer seems to be. The German media is playing a large role, actively pursuing the story, making it appear to some critics that it is distorting the problem and out to get the church. This sentiment, however, does not appear to be widespread and it is being undermined by the growing number of victims now claiming to have been abused.

A hotline set up last month by the church to counsel victims of sexual abuse was overrun on its first day with 4,459 calls -- far more than the therapists hired to staff the phones could handle. Indeed, they reportedly were only able to conduct 162 counseling sessions, ranging from five minutes to an hour in length.

Earlier, when the hotline was first announced, critics doubted whether victims would telephone the organization that was responsible for their suffering in the first place. The phone calls have confounded these critics.

As has been the case in the United States, Canada, Ireland and elsewhere, media coverage and the willingness of victims to come forward with their stories seem to go hand in hand. With reports of abuse victims appearing in the media almost daily, yet more victims are speaking up, even though, reading the reports, it is clear that their memories often surface long repressed torturous and traumatic experiences.

German Catholic prelates, meanwhile, pressured by the media coverage, seem to be playing catchup. The hotline is an example. The head of the German Catholic bishops' conference has spoken out several times and issued a Good Friday statement denouncing past church failures and mistakes in the handling of abuse cases.

Clerics have neglected helping abuse victims by a "wrongly intended desire to protect the church's reputation," Archbishop Robert Zollitsch of Freiburg lamented as he condemned what he called "the appalling crimes of sexual abuse."

He urged church officials to face their painful record on the handling of these cases. The church is appalled by the harm done to victims who were often unable to speak about their pain for decades, he said. "Wounds were inflicted that are hardly curable," the archbishop added.

This is the kind of language Blaine and Dorris like to hear, even as they regret it has taken sustained media attention to draw it out of the prelates.

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