

Pope's brother linked to new claims of child abuse by clergy

By Jerome Taylor, Religious Affairs Correspondent

Fresh allegations emerge over Bavarian school where Georg Ratzinger led choir for 30 years

A series of allegations in Germany and Holland have plunged the Catholic Church into a renewed crisis over how it has dealt with child abuse after it emerged that the Pope's brother ran a renowned choir at the centre of some of the latest claims.

Reports of systematic historical abuse by clergy have surfaced at three schools in the Regensburg diocese in Bavaria. One of them is the much-heralded Regensburger Domspatzen, a thousand-year-old male choir and boarding school, whose choral master for 30 years was the Pope's older brother, Georg Ratzinger.

Monsignor Ratzinger has agreed to testify in any eventual prosecutions - but says that he knew of no abuse. And last night the German Justice Minister, Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger, joined a growing chorus of politicians in Berlin to criticise the church over its attitude to the investigation, accusing Catholic institutions of a policy of secrecy.

"In many schools there was a wall of silence allowing for abuse and violence," said Ms Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger, a prominent critic of the church. She pointed to a Vatican directive from 2001 which required that even the most damaging allegations should be first investigated internally and then reported to the authorities. A church spokesman called her criticisms "absurd".

A separate sex scandal has also enveloped the Catholic Church in the Netherlands after three people said they were abused at a boarding school run by priests in the 1960s. Since the allegations were published on Friday more than 200 people have come forward to a designated helpline claiming that they were also abused by monks and priests.

The new allegations are a source of major embarrassment to the Vatican, which had been hoping to draw a line under child abuse. Over the past decade the issue has enormously damaged the church's reputation and finances.

The allegations in Germany first surfaced last month when investigators began looking into a series of Jesuit schools, but the scandal broadened out over the weekend into the heart of deeply Catholic Bavaria. The allegations coming out of the Regensburg diocese are particularly awkward because the Pope and his brother spent much of their careers in senior positions there, which will inevitably raise questions as to whether they ever encountered or heard about clergy who sexually abused minors.

Throughout the 1970s Joseph Ratzinger taught theology at the University of Regensburg. His older brother Georg took over the Regensburger Domspatzen in 1964 and, over the next 30 years, helped turn the male-only choir into one of the best in the world.

But he says that he never heard of any abuse in his time with the choir. Asked by the Italian newspaper La Repubblica whether he would talk to German officials, the 86-year-old Mgr Ratzinger replied: "Obviously I'd be ready to do so, but I am not able to provide any information on any deed that could be punished, because I don't have any - I never knew anything about it."

Any abuse at the Regensburger Domspatzen, he said, occurred before he took over. He did admit that pupils at the school were subjected to a climate of "discipline and rigour" but added that this was necessary in order to reach "a high musical, artistic level".

But Franz Wittenbrink, a German composer who lived at the school until 1967, described the school as being run by "a sophisticated system of sadistic punishments in connection with sexual lust". He was also quoted by Der Spiegel as saying that it was "inexplicable" that the Pope's brother knew nothing of what was happening.

The new sex scandals have emerged just weeks after Pope Benedict XVI gave Ireland's bishops a public dressing down for failing to deal with child abuse which he described as a "heinous crime". He also called on Catholic bishops to tackle allegations with "honesty and courage". But, while the Vatican has given its backing to a full investigation of the allegations, the Pope has so far remained personally silent on the matter.

We Are Church, a prominent Christian support network for abuse victims, has now called on the Pope publicly to declare whether he knew of any abuse allegations when he was a bishop.

"He must answer the question about what he knew and what he did about it," said Christian Weisner, the group's German spokesperson.

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