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Church defends priestly celibacy

THE Vatican has reaffirmed the importance of celibacy for Catholic priests, the day after Austria's leading bishop urged a new look at the policy amid snowballing pedophilia scandals.

"Priestly celibacy is a gift of the Holy Spirit which must be understood and experienced with a fullness of feeling and joy, in a total relationship with the Lord," Cardinal Claudio Hummes was quoted as saying today.

"This unique and privileged relationship with God makes the priest an authentic witness of a singular spiritual paternity," said Cardinal Hummes, who heads the Vatican's department concerned with the priesthood, in remarks quoted by the ANSA news agency.

Archbishop of Vienna Christoph Schoenborn, writing in the archdiocese's in-house magazine, called for an unflinching examination of the possible roots of child sex abuse by priests.

Archbishop Schoenborn cited "the issue of priest training, as well as the question of what happened in the so-called sexual revolution".

He said: "It also includes the issue of priest celibacy and the issue of personality development. It requires a great deal of honesty, both on the part of the church and of society as a whole."

Archbishop Schoenborn's office later insisted he was not calling into question the Vatican's stance on celibacy.

According to Vatican watcher Bruno Bartoloni, Archbishop Schoenborn was warning that "pedophilia can reflect the frustration of those priests who are not at ease with being celibate".

The cardinal was suggesting "pathological situations" can result from a lack of proper psychological training for priests, Mr Bartoloni said.

A number of cases of sexual abuse in the Catholic church in Austria have come to light recently, joining major scandals in Ireland and Germany.

Archbishop Schoenborn also said he could understand the frustration of many church employees over the proliferation of pedophilia scandals.

"Enough is enough. That's what many people are saying and thinking," Archbishop Schoenborn wrote. "Enough of the scandals! How is it that members of the church are constantly made responsible for crimes that we didn't commit?"

The Brazilian Cardinal Hummes, the prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy, was speaking at the start of a two-day theological convention.

Many theologians, notably Hans Kueng of Switzerland, have questioned the celibacy rule for priests, as well as lay Catholic groups such as We Are Church, which has called for numerous modernising reforms since its founding in 1996.

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