11.3.2010 - TIME in partnership with CNN

German Clergy Abuse Scandal Reaches the Pope's Family

By Jeff Israely and Tristana Moore / Berlin

Pope Benedict XVI's triumphant return to his Bavarian hometown of Marktl am Inn four years ago — his first since becoming pontiff — was made all the more poignant by the presence of his older brother, Georg Ratzinger. Five decades after they'd entered seminary together, the new pontiff and retired church choir director stepped with the same soft gait and wavy white hair into the town's tiny riverside chapel. Praying silently, side by side, they might just as well have been an aging pair of humble village priests.

But that tender image has been shattered by recent allegations that young singers in the famed "Regensburger Domspatzen" choir, which the elder Ratzinger directed from 1964-1994, suffered sexual abuse and beatings at the hands of priests dating back to the 1950s. Though the retired Ratzinger, 86, denies any knowledge of sexual abuse during his time with the choir, he has admitted to slapping several singers and has apologized for not having intervened to limit the more cruel beatings that have been alleged by others. (See pictures of the Pope in the Holy Land.)

"At the beginning, I would often slap people on the face but actually I always had a bad conscience about it," he told the Bavarian newspaper Passauer Neue Presse on Tuesday. Ratzinger said he would have intervened had he known about the "scale" of the violence. "The boys would tell me what happened at the school and I knew that the rector there was violent and would beat the boys hard and that he would do it for no reason," he said. "I was glad in 1980 when corporal punishment was banned."

Others, however, claim Ratzinger must have known more at the time. Franz Wittenbrink, a former singer who lived at the Regensburg boarding school connected with the choir from 1958-1967, tells TIME it was "unimaginable" that Ratzinger hadn't heard about cases of sexual abuse during his time as director. Wittenbrink alleges there was "a widespread system of sadistic punishments and sexual lust" at the school and in the choir. He claims he was physically abused by young men still in training to become priests at the school, who would routinely smack him on the bottom with their hands or sticks. "This amounted to sexual humiliation," he tells TIME. "I was scared and I was shocked." (Read: "More Headaches for the Vatican: Priests and Child Porn.")

The reverberations from the scandal have been felt back at the Vatican, where the Holy See spokesman was compelled to respond directly to the abuse allegations — a task that would typically be handled by someone on the diocesan level. The spokesman, Rev. Federico Lombardi, said Tuesday that German church authorities acted "promptly and decisively" to investigate the allegations after they emerged. Neither Lombardi nor the Pope himself, however, has commented on Ratzinger's admissions about slapping young people or failing to address wider suspicions of violence. The head of the German Bishops' Conference, Archbishop Robert Zollitsch, who made a public apology last week, is slated to meet with the Pope on Friday to discuss the widening scandal further.

Benedict's native Germany has been rocked by a series of clergy abuse allegations since January, when former students at Berlin's elite Jesuit high school, Canisius College, went public with accusations against two former priests at the institution. Similar allegations then emerged at other Catholic schools and institutions in Germany, including a Benedictine monastery and several boarding schools. German Justice Minister Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger condemned the "wall of silence" within the Catholic hierarchy, accusing the church of hiding behind a 2001 Vatican directive that called for cases of abuse to be investigated internally

before going to state authorities. "This directive makes clear that even serious abuse allegations fall under papal confidentiality and thus should not be forwarded on outside the church," she said. (Read: "The Pope's Sex Abuse Challenge.")

Chris Weisner, spokesman for the German Catholic reform organization "We Are Church," says the group's sex abuse telephone hotline has received an average of six calls a day from alleged victims in recent weeks, and that 18 of Germany's 27 dioceses have now been touched by the scandal. "Abuse is widespread," Weisner tells TIME. "The church is investigating the cases very reluctantly. [But"> it has a duty to uphold moral standards. Catholics in Germany are extremely disappointed and angry."

Lombardi insists, however, that church leaders in Germany are committed to addressing the problem. "They have shown a desire for transparency, in a way they have accelerated bringing the problem to light by inviting the victims to speak up even when the cases dated to a while back," Lombardi told Vatican Radio earlier this week. James Martin, a Jesuit priest and associate editor of the New York-based Catholic magazine America, says Benedict, too, has been notably more eager than his predecessors to confront the issue of clergy sex abuse, including holding an unprecedented meeting with victims on his trip to the U.S. in 2008. (See pictures of the Pope meeting Obama.)

Still, the allegations in Germany could have far greater resonance, given the possible personal implications for Benedict. "The Pope is more familiar with the church in Germany than that in any other country, so any accusations of abuse would probably affect him far more," says Martin. "It cannot fail to evoke strong personal emotions from the Holy Father." And the allegations are yet another reminder how far the sins of clergy abuse may have reached in the Catholic Church.
Zuletzt geändert am 11.03.2010