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Child abuse crisis engulfs the Vatican

Past returns to haunt pope over paedophile priest case in Bavaria

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For Father Rupert Frania, it seemed the best way. His parishioners in the Bavarian spa town of Bad Tolz had just learned a terrible secret. It had been reported that one of their curates was a convicted paedophile, Peter Huller-mann, who had officiated at the children's mass. The one who had been with their sons and daughters the year before at a campsite in the mountains over their medieval town.

In his sermon at the main mass, Frania began with the parable of the prodigal son - and was stopped dead in mid-sentence. "I cannot listen to that," shouted a man who was soon to have been married by Hullermann. "You just cannot dodge the issue any longer," he continued as other parishioners applauded and some snouted "shut your mouth" at their priest.

It was a raucously rebellious start to a week in which the disclosure of hundreds of cases of alleged clerical sex abuse in the Roman Catholic church's European heartlands shook the allegiance of millions and forced their pastors to make unprecedented admissions of guilt and mortification.

In Armagh on St Patrick's Day the primate of All Ireland, Sean Brady, told the congregation in his cathedral that the clergy should admit "the full truth of our sinfulness". Brady was one of scores of prelates bowing their heads in disgrace in the Netherlands, Austria, Germany, and the German-speaking parts of Switzerland and Italy. Almost 700 new cases have surfaced. It was a week of calamity for Benedict XVI, who became pope pledging to shore up Christianity in an increasingly secular Europe. The religious affairs author Clifford Longley says: "It is the worst crisis for the Vatican since the middle ages." The scandal "brings into contrast the priest as man of God, symbol of purity and holiness and the sexual abuse of children as the ultimate betrayal of innocence, representing unspeakable evil. And conspiracy in high places to hide the scandal."

The question remains why this situation should be judged so grave when the numbers involved are smaller than in the US, where a 2004 report found evidence in support of almost 7,000 allegations. One possible answer is that the crisis has spread from the US to Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and now the German-speaking heart of Europe. The church has already had to find $sbn in compensation and now faces the prospect of having to fund more compensation, settlements and legal fees at the same time as disgusted Catholics stop their contributions.

This is scarcely the first crisis involving what an Australian victims' group, Broken Rites, has termed black-collar crime. But never before has a scandal cast doubts on a pope's judgment and authority. So far the debate has focused on his role in the Hullermann affair. Hullermann was transferred to the Munich diocese when the pope, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, was archbishop, ostensibly for therapy. Though known to be a paedophile, he was moved to a parish where he was convicted of abusing another child.

Christian Weisner, spokesman for the lay movement Wir sind Kirche, said in Munich "people are asking: 'What did [Benedict"> know? What did he do?'" Many Catholics in Bavaria and elsewhere were ready to accept the diocese's version: the decision on Hullerman was made by Ratzinger's deputy. But Weisner added: "The pope is asking for transparency. So he, too, should be transparent and ask his successor to open the archives for people to see exactly what happened." The issue of

Benedict's responsibility encompasses his subsequent role as pope. Weisner argues that this pope "learned more about clerical sex abuse than any other bishop or cardinal, and has done more to fight it than any other cardinal or pope". But there is a sharp distinction between his attitude as a cardinal and his activities as pope that could leave a stain on his papacy.

In 2005 he was elected days after declaring that the time had come to sweep "the filth" from his church. By then he had read files on more than 3,000 clerical abuse cases channelled to his department by a decree issued four years earlier by John Paul II. Most cases dealt with by the department in recent years resulted in the accused being removed, if not defrocked. The problem for Benedict is that he changed his mind. The US Vatican-watcher John Allen published in the National Catholic Reporter an extract from the transcript of a conference in Spain that showed that, as late as November 2002, Ratzinger dismissed the US abuse scandals as the result of a "planned campaign" in the media.

By 2002 the cardinal had signed what critics claim was an incitement to obstruction of justice. A letter he circulated to bishops in 2001 reminded them that internal church inquiries into serious offences were covered by papal secrecy, with a penalty of excommunication. "The question is whether Ratzinger's past may trump Benedict's present," wrote Allen.

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