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Catholic abuse scandal edges closer to pope

The problem is no longer an American aberration, and Catholics want to know what Pope Benedict knew when he was archbishop of Munich.

By Mitchell Landsberg and Henry Chu
Reporting from Los Angeles and London

First, it was an American problem. Then, an Irish problem. But as the scandal of child sexual abuse by Catholic priests has rocked continental Europe in recent weeks, observers inside and outside the church have begun to recognize that it is now very much a Vatican problem, one that is creeping ever closer to Pope Benedict XVI.

"The focus now is on Benedict," the U.S.-based National Catholic Reporter wrote Friday in a strongly worded editorial on the scandal. "What did he know? When did he know it? How did he act once he knew?"

Revelations of abuse in Germany, particularly in the Munich archdiocese while Benedict was the archbishop, have seemingly put a lid on the argument by some in the Roman Catholic Church that sexually abusive priests were an American aberration, the result of lax morals and overblown news coverage in the United States.

They also have brought the crisis to Benedict's doorstep, with the news that, as archbishop of Munich, he approved the transfer of an abusive priest from another jurisdiction, and that later, as the church's top doctrinal official, he was in a position to know about a Wisconsin case in which the church failed to defrock a child-molesting priest.

The Vatican has responded sharply to new developments, defending Benedict against any implication that he failed to act against abusive priests.

A Vatican spokesman reacted swiftly Friday when the New York Times reported that Benedict, when he was Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, had been copied on a memo notifying him that Father Peter Hullermann was being reassigned to pastoral work even as Hullermann was undergoing therapy for pedophilia. Hullermann was later convicted of molesting boys.

Father Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, dismissed the article as "mere speculation," and referred reporters to a statement by the Munich archdiocese saying Ratzinger had not been aware that the priest had returned to pastoral work.

The Vatican also reacted sharply to an earlier New York Times article, which said Ratzinger, as the church's top doctrinal official in the 1990s, had failed to act against the Wisconsin priest, who was believed to have abused as many as 200 deaf boys from the 1950s to the 1970s.

In that instance, as with the Munich case, church officials said the matter had been handled by a subordinate, not by Ratzinger.

Benedict has accepted the resignation of one of five Irish bishops who offered to quit over the scandal in their country, and he apologized to Irish Catholics in his pastoral letter sent to the church in Ireland last week. But

he has yet to publicly demand any resignations or to comment on the scandals roiling his native Germany, much to the consternation of some Catholics there.

"If the pope wants to solve the problem himself by writing letters to every country where there's a crisis, he will never be finished,"said Christian Weisner, a spokesman in Munich for the We Are Church reform movement.

From 1981 until his election as pope in 2005, Ratzinger headed the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, where he was responsible for upholding doctrinal purity in the church. In 1985, the first rumblings of the sexual abuse crisis occurred in the United States when a Louisiana priest pleaded guilty to 11 counts of molestation. As more cases came to light through the 1990s and 2000s, the Vatican attitude was clear: Something was wrong with America.

In 1993 Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls spoke out about the crisis in the United States. "One would have to ask if the real culprit is not a society that is irresponsibly permissive, hyper-inflated with sexuality [and"> capable of creating circumstances that induce even people who have received a solid moral formation to commit grave moral acts," he said

No one is singling out the United States that way now. And the pope's statements suggest that he sees the gravity of the situation. His expressions of deep remorse go well beyond anything said by his predecessor, John Paul II.

The pope "is seen as one 'who gets it' when it comes to the horror of clergy sexual abuse," Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan of New York wrote in a blog this week. "Who can forget his forthright references to this scourge at least half a dozen times in his visit to our country nearly two years ago, and his moving meeting with victim-survivors? And now we have his blunt, realistic pastoral letter to Ireland on the crises there. He must be asking, as we all do, 'When will it all end?' "

Father Thomas J. Reese, a Jesuit priest who is a senior research fellow at Georgetown University, said of the pope:

"If you look at some of his early quotes, it's clear that he didn't quite get it, nor did anyone else in the church at that time. But he did grow. . . . He learned and came to understand the seriousness of this problem a lot faster than a lot of other people in the Vatican, including Pope John Paul II. And he's been a lot better on this than John Paul II."

But Benedict has yet to satisfy many European and American Catholics, who are demanding greater transparency and stronger action against those in the hierarchy whom they accuse of coddling abusive priests and covering up the problem.

The stakes are high, the National Catholic Reporter suggested in its editorial.

"We now face the largest institutional crisis in centuries, possibly in church history," the independent Catholic newspaper said. "How this crisis is handled by Benedict, what he says and does, how he responds and what remedies he seeks, will likely determine the future health of our church for decades, if not centuries, to come."

David Quinn, former editor of the Irish Catholic newspaper and a religious affairs columnist in Dublin, Ireland, said, "There really is a bush fire raging and it's gone beyond his capacity to put it out. The thing is just cascading at an incredible rate."27
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