

Shame and Fear

Inside Germany's Catholic Sexual Abuse Scandal

The Catholic Church in Germany has been shaken in recent days by revelations of a series of sexual abuse cases. Close to 100 priests and members of the laity have been suspected of abuse in recent years. After years of suppression, the wall of silence appears to be crumbling. By SPIEGEL Staff.

This is what it looks like, the document of a conspiracy: 24 pages, with appendix, in Latin, published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at the Vatican. A "norma interna," or confidential set of guidelines for all bishops, who were required to keep it a secret for all eternity, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.

The guidelines, issued in the year of our Lord 1962, address a sensitive subject: sex in the confessional. The Vatican doesn't put it quite that directly, preferring to use more guarded terminology to describe what happens when a priest leads a member of his flock astray before, during or after the confession -- in other words, when he provokes a penitent "toward impure and obscene matters" through "words or signs or nods of the head (or) by touch."

According to the instructions from Rome, the bishops were to deal very firmly with each individual case -- so firmly, in fact, that everything would remain within the confines of the Holy Church. After all, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith -- formerly known as the Inquisition -- has centuries of experience in conducting internal investigations. The Vatican has always filled all the positions in such investigations -- prosecutors, defendants, judges -- from within its own ranks, while the investigation files have been kept in the secret archives of the Roman Curia.

Claim to Moral Authority

On the surface, the Vatican's objective is to protect the sacrament of the confession. In reality, however, it is trying to uphold the Catholic Church's claim to being a superior moral authority.

Nothing can be allowed to besmirch this authority: not the sexual abuse of children and adolescents, committed by thousands of Catholic priests worldwide; not the secret relationships between pastor and their housekeepers; not the covering-up of priests' children; and not the love affairs between gay clerics. They are all cases of a double standard that arose because it is difficult for people -- even priests -- to subordinate their human desires to a papal encyclical.

This code of silence has been upheld for decades, in some cases informally and in some cases by virtue of Vatican directives like the 1962 guideline.

But now the wall of silence is coming down here in Germany. It started when Berlin's Canisius College, an elite Jesuit high school, recently disclosed the sordid past of a number of members of the order, who had abused students at the school in the 1970s and 1980s. After that, new victims began coming forward on a daily basis. By last Friday, at least 40 of them had accused three Jesuit priests of molesting children and adolescents, first in Berlin and later at the St. Ansgar School in Hamburg, the St. Blasien College in the Black Forest and in several parishes in the northern German state of Lower Saxony.

Tip of the Iceberg

As shocking as the revelations were, they are merely "the tip of the iceberg," says the current director of Canisius College, Father Klaus Mertes, who made public the sexual abuse of students.

For decades, German bishops tried to look the other way when their pastors engaged in sexual abuse, as well as to downplay the problem by characterizing it as isolated incidents. Now they are finally revealing their own figures, though hesitantly. According to a SPIEGEL survey of Germany's 27 dioceses conducted last week, at least 94 priests and members of the laity in Germany are suspected or have been suspected of abusing countless children and adolescents since 1995. A total of 24 of the 27 dioceses responded to SPIEGEL's questions.

A group called the Round Table for Care in Children's Homes recently published an interim report which contains dramatic findings. The report deals with the wrongs committed since the 1950s against children

and adolescents living in homes, almost half of which were run by the Catholic Church.

According to the report, more than 150 victims of sexual abuse have come forward with their stories in recent months. One of them is a woman who, as a 15-year-old girl, had to sit in the confessional and watch a priest masturbate. When she tried to get away from him, she was beaten by the nuns who ran the home. There has never been a systematic investigation into how many Catholic schools, homes and rectories were the scenes of abuse, even when there was evidence in the files. The Round Table group plans to present its final report at the end of the year.

Protecting Offenders, Ignoring Victims

A tremor is currently passing through the Catholic Church in Germany. It could be merely the beginning of an earthquake of proportions which have so far only been seen in the American and Irish Church. Tens of thousands of abuse cases were brought to light in both countries. Could Germany be next?

The scandal is just beginning, and yet it has already made a deep impression: on parents, who expect Catholic schools to provide their children with moral guidance; on the victims, who are now confronting their dark past after living with it half their lives; and on the faithful, who now regard their church with dismay. Their shock stems not only from the fact that there are pedophiles in the church, as there are elsewhere in society. It also comes from the fact that the church systematically protected the perpetrators and ignored the victims, and that it repressed and covered up sexual abuse in its own ranks for decades -- and in doing so enabled pedophile priests to leave behind a trail of emotional devastation throughout Germany.

To this day, the chairman of the German Bishops' Conference, Archbishop of Freiburg Robert Zollitsch, has not offered any convincing words of apology or emphatic gestures of redress to the victims of the church's double standard. After vacillating for days, he finally decided not to grant SPIEGEL an interview. The official Church prefers not to allow the suffering of its victims to become a major issue, because it doesn't fit into the Church's hypocritical worldview.

The Bishops' Conference will not even address the sex scandals until Feb. 22. "The revelations show a dark side of the church that scares me," says the Jesuit Hans Langendörfer, secretary of the Bishops' Conference. "We expressly want an investigation."

Repressed Morality

Nevertheless, the clerics are still a long way from any sort of true self-criticism or far-reaching analysis, because it would require them to examine the Church's repressed sexual morality that is dictated from above. It would require an honest discussion about celibacy and its consequences, particularly when it comes to the Church's recruitment practices. In a church that is having trouble attracting men to the priesthood, particularly as a result of the ban on marriage, the number of good candidates has become so small that too many inappropriate candidates get admitted.

Does this mean that the church will continue to pursue its policy of hemming and hawing, and of avoiding the important questions, as it has already done so often? It will be difficult to carry on like that, now that the Jesuits' offensive has put the entire clergy under pressure. The order intends to systematically investigate abuse in its own ranks, as painful as that effort will be and even if the growing number of revelations by former students plunge it into what is likely to be the deepest crisis in Jesuit history. Father Stefan Dartmann, the head of the Jesuit order of Germany, says that an "immense tragedy is now becoming apparent."

His fears are justified, as more and more former students come forward. In addition to the Canisius College and the schools in St. Ansgar and St. Blasien, there have now been revelations of abuse at the Jesuits' Aloisius College in Bonn's Bad Godesberg neighborhood, where entire generations of children of politicians and diplomats went to school.

'It Was Difficult for Us to Endure the Priests' Sexual Advances'

One of the students who experienced the brotherly love of a Jesuit priest firsthand is Robert K. Speaking of his time at the Bad Godesberg school, he says: "It was difficult for us, as young boys, to endure the priests' sexual advances. They ranged from extremely embarrassing questions about the minute details of 'shameful acts' during confession, to asking for kisses and caresses and, finally, to concrete sadistic sexual assaults." One prefect, Father S., "had small boys come to his room, strip naked from the waist down and then lie down on the father's bed. The father would beat them violently on the behind with a clothes hanger, and then follow up with displays of affection."

Jovial Persona

Evidence of such assaults ranges back to the 1950s. Some priests were apparently able to keep their urges more or less under control so that they did not attract attention, like Father M., a now-deceased former mathematics teacher at the Canisius College, who liked to watch 7th-grade boys during swimming lessons. Others would invite their students to go for drives in their BMWs. Students made jokes about the fact that the priests involved would try to grope them while in the car.

Afterwards, the offenders would enmesh themselves and their students in a web of guilt, awkward silence and extorted atonement. One of them was Father Peter R., a corpulent religion teacher with side-burns and tinted glasses who is one of the three priests at the Canisius College whose misdeeds have now been uncovered -- and who denies everything. The Jesuit priest cultivated a jovial persona and tried to come across as someone who understood young people. The license plate on the VW bus he drove included the letters "SJ," for "Societas Jesu." Later, the Canisius students said sarcastically that the letters stood for "Seine Jungs" ("His Boys").

For eight years, starting in 1973, Peter R. ran a sort of youth center on the grounds of the Canisius College known as the "Marian Congregation." The priest selected group leaders from among the students enrolled in his afternoon club, known as the Burg ("Castle"), who were then invited to weekend "training sessions" at a Jesuit retreat in Bavaria.

Photos taken at the time show the priest, who insisted that his students call him Peter, surrounded by his beloved students. He would accompany "his boys" on ski outings and to the swimming pool. The adolescents in the photos are dressed in jeans and tweed jackets. They can be seen drinking beer and wine directly from the bottle, horsing around and sometimes running through the room with their shirts off. At first glance, the images seem to be nothing more than harmless photos of privileged young people from West Berlin, who saw themselves as part of the last free school before Russia and as part of an exclusive group.

One-on-One Talks

When he thinks back to the Jesuits' work with young people at the time, Ansgar Hocke, who is now 52, says it was characterized by a spirit of optimism. At the time, he recalls, he and his friends believed that "the days of the priests in cassocks, who shouted at their students, were deeply conservative and who saw the catechism as their only guideline, were coming to an end." Young, athletic priests were breathing new life into the school. "We didn't see how sick and unstable they were," says Hocke.

The students felt that the right to sexual happiness must be part of human happiness. "We knew that the young priests were excluded from this happiness, and we often saw how helpless they were," says Hocke. He himself did not have personal experience of their complexes, but others suffered as a result in terrible ways.

The students who belonged to Father R.'s inner circle were constantly subjected to "one-on-one talks." The sessions sometimes took place in the Burg's basement, which quickly acquired a notorious reputation among students, who referred to it as the "masturbation basement" or the "interrogation room." "I had to take off my trousers and lie down on the bed," says one former student. "He wanted to watch me masturbate, and he touched me while I was doing it." When he was finished, the former student says, R. would ask him: "Did you like it?"

Keeping It Secret

A mix of shame and fear, constant threats and intimidation, but also friendly gestures from the priest and his image of being the students' buddy, must have prompted his victims to keep his secret for years, or to treat it as a joking matter at best. Usually the abuse ended only when the students became older and were no longer to Father R.'s taste.

"At the time, we all heard that these masturbation stories were going around. But we tended to laugh it off," says Johannes Siebner, a former student at the Canisius College who is now a Jesuit priest and current director of the St. Blasien College.

Letters that the students wrote to each other when they found out about the allegations reveal their bewilderment: "It was all completely new to me, even though I always had this feeling about it ... The whole thing was a total shock for me, and I had trouble processing it. This is all so unbelievable, vile, disgusting and bad ... And then there was the whole system of pressure, which wasn't that easy to get out of once you were in it ... But I also don't understand the order, and how it can be so irresponsible ... I'm trembling slightly as I write this today, and I feel afraid."

'I Lost My Innocence'

The boy who received the letter, a victim of Father R. himself, is 48 today and says that the abuse "cast a shadow" on his school days. The atmosphere of "defenselessness, humiliation and lies" still has an impact on him today, he says. "You feel like yourself only part of the time. I still don't understand why I put up with it at the time. I lost my innocence and enjoyment of life."

It wasn't until 1981, after he had graduated from high school, that he found the courage to report the abuse to the then-headmaster, Father Karl Heinz Fischer. Fischer reported the charges to his superiors, and Father R. was transferred soon afterwards. Fischer doesn't know what happened after that to his fellow priest of many years. "I reacted at the time within the framework of what was possible," he says.

Sitting on the problem or transferring the abuser became the preferred approach within the hierarchy of the Church and the order.

Father R. and his two fellow priests, Bernhard E. and Wolfgang S., were transferred from Berlin to various places in Germany, working in subsequent positions as teachers in Hamburg and in the Black Forest, and as pastors and youth group directors in Hildesheim, Göttingen and Hanover.

In none of these new locations were the school principals, priests, students or parents warned of the new priests' dangerous tendencies -- something that is hardly surprising, given the Church's tendency to keep things quiet. Anyone who did ask about the reasons for their transfers was told, for example, that there had been financial irregularities. When this happened, the priest in question was simply not given access to school funds. The cash may have been protected -- but the students were not.

An Attractive Alternative to Public Schools for Many Parents

Many parents in Germany have long regarded Catholic schools as an attractive alternative to poor quality public education. They expect dedicated teachers who challenge and encourage their students, imparting both knowledge and values to them. "The student must experience at all times that he, as a developing person, is important to the teacher," reads the mission statement of Hamburg's St. Ansgar School.

But now cracks are beginning to appear in this carefully cultivated image -- and precisely at a time when many schools are processing applications for the coming academic year.

"It's a disaster for us," says Friedrich Stolze, the principal of St. Ansgar, who dresses in jeans and a sports jacket. "These priests did an immense amount of damage, both to their students and to us today." He feels "anger and contempt" for the men involved, and says that it is clear that "the reputation of Catholic schools has been damaged."

When Stolze came to the Hamburg high school as a young teacher in 1981, two of the priests who now stand accused of molestation were still there. Should he and his colleagues have noticed anything? "There was nothing," he says. "We don't remember anything." He is furious at the leaders of the order at the time. "I cannot understand that someone would simply be transferred to another school, under the assumption that he would be able to control his pedophile tendencies there."

Downplaying Abuse

Whenever rumors surfaced in Catholic schools, parishes, youth groups and children's homes, or victims overcame their shame and reported the abuse, the church would downplay the cases, characterizing them as isolated, regrettable exceptions or the misconduct of an errant priest. This was the position taken by the Vatican and by German bishops, who were unwilling to accept that the problem could lie in the system itself. But what happens when the number of cases begins to rise, as it did in other countries?

In the United States, it also began as a problem of individual priests who had molested altar boys or students. Like their German brothers, American Catholic bishops tried for years to protect the priests, downplaying the accusations and ignoring the victims -- until US courts, politicians and the public started demanding answers, and forced them to pay compensation. In the state of Delaware and elsewhere, for example, lawmakers lifted the statute of limitations, leading to a flood of new lawsuits. The resulting rulings forced dioceses to open their archives.

More and more victims came forward, and in the end the Catholic Church in North America was overrun by the biggest scandal in its history. The US bishops concluded that there were credible accusations against around 5,000 priests involving the abuse of about 12,000 children and adolescents since 1950.

Several dioceses, including Tucson, Arizona and San Diego, California, had to seek bankruptcy protection when they were unable to pay the financial settlements ordered by the court on hundreds of claims that had been filed. The Archdiocese of Los Angeles alone was ordered to pay more than \$660 million (€470 million) in damages, which represented a substantial share of the more than \$2 billion paid out by the US

Catholic Church as a whole.

A series of sex scandals also shook Ireland, where a commission concluded that about 35,000 children were beaten and abused in Catholic children's homes and orphanages between 1914 and 2000.

Not Just Isolated Incidents

The German church, on the other hand, is only beginning to confront the past. Last week, 24 of Germany's 27 dioceses responded to a SPIEGEL survey on suspected cases of abuse in their own ranks since 1995. Only three dioceses, Limburg, Regensburg and Dresden-Meissen, chose not to respond. A spokesman for the Dresden diocese said that it did not participate because it did "not wish to inflame the current discussion even further."

The results of the survey show that parishes and church facilities all across Germany have been confronted with cases of sexual abuse by priests and others affiliated with the church. With at least 94 suspects uncovered nationwide so far, the church's official line that cases of abuse are just isolated incidents no longer holds water. The abusers include not only priests, but also include lay workers for the church, such as sextons, choir directors, employees of church charities and youth program volunteers.

It is becoming increasingly clear how difficult it is for the state to punish the culprits. In many cases, the abuses have been statute-barred for years. As with the former students at Berlin's Canisius College, the victims often do not come forward until 20 or 30 years later. At that point, prosecutors no longer have the option of filing charges. Their only choice then is to either reject proceedings outright or promptly bring them to a close.

Multiple Cases

The Rottenburg-Stuttgart diocese in southwestern Germany prosecuted 18 priests and 5 laypersons in 23 cases of suspected abuse. Six cases could be abandoned right away, because the five clerics and one layperson they involved had already died. Ultimately, 11 suspects were investigated and five sentenced.

Two priests were linked to abuse in the Magdeburg diocese, but their cases, too, have expired under the statute of limitations. However, one church volunteer was put on trial for allegations of molestation during a "religious children's week."

In the Paderborn archdiocese, a curate was sentenced to a prison term of six years and three months, while another priest was given two years' probation. Both were dismissed from the Church.

In Munich, charges were filed in three cases of child abuse. One case was dropped, a second resulted in a conviction and the third case is pending.

In Cologne, one priest died before the accusations could be clarified, another priest was sentenced and three cases were dropped. In addition, abuse charges were filed against a church musician in 2001, an organist in 2002, the director of a scout group in 2004 and an altar server in 2008. A church janitor is currently on trial.

In the Bavarian city of Bamberg, several people accused a vicar capitular of sexual abuse. The man was removed from office, but then the prosecutor's investigation was terminated.

Church Reluctant to Shed Light on Crimes

Similar reports have emerged from cities like Würzburg, Münster and Aachen, and from many other dioceses. A few have led to convictions, but in most cases the state is powerless because the presumed crimes happened long ago. And what is the church doing about the situation? Why has it been so noticeably reluctant to shed light on the crimes? And why did it not take tougher action toward suspected abusers?

The prevailing view at the Vatican is that the public outcry over abuse cases is used as an excuse to revive old animosities toward the Catholic Church as a whole, as well as to fuel the usual criticism of the pope by secular intellectuals and the disenfranchised.

For this reason, many members of the Curia believe it is preferable to remain silent than to give these enemies of the Church a chance to attack and that Rome's top priority should be to bide its time -- not only in the hope of riding out the storm, but also to avoid jumping the gun. Determined to protect their own people, they instinctively place the good of the Church above that of the victims. Their first question is not "how can we help the victims?" but "what shall we do with the priests?"

A long time -- too long, from the point of view of the victims -- usually passes before the pope himself

weighs in on the issue. After the scope of the abuse scandal in the United States had become apparent in early 2002, it took then-Pope John Paul II about half a year before he finally made a statement at the World Youth Day in Toronto. Pope Benedict XVI was the first pope to meet with abuse victims -- albeit unofficially, on the sidelines of his trip to the United States and only after prolonged hesitation on the part of his advisers. "It is more important to have good priests than many priests," he said in a somewhat lackluster comment. It was far from a turning point.

To this day, Benedict has not sent the comforting pastoral letter he had promised to the Irish, who were shaken by a decades-long abuse scandal. Moreover, no victims have been invited to the Vatican.

'One Can't Say that the Criminal Law Has Any Practical Significance'

The subject of abuse committed by priests has no place in Joseph Ratzinger's world of academics and prayer. For him, the crimes against children are the ultimate, most egregious expression of a culture of godlessness, and unfortunately not even clerics are immune to it. In his Wednesday address last week, Benedict's recommendation to his priests was to simply follow the example set by St. Dominic and devote themselves fully to prayer and learning.

And for those who have already fallen prey to "weaknesses" of the flesh, the pope offers the relative leniency of an internal Church proceeding. In dealing with sex offenders in the clergy, the Vatican depends, at least initially, solely on its own apparatus, its own investigators and its own courts. This is a reflection of centuries of tradition, ranging from the "holy" Inquisition to today's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome. The procedures are dignified, characterized by a spirit of forgiveness and charity toward fellow brothers, are usually conducted in Latin and are closed to the public.

But because the Church refuses to admit to the mere possibility of crimes within its own ranks, its criminal law is as obfuscating as incense smoke at the altar. "One can't say that the criminal law has any practical significance," says Klaus Lüdicke, an expert on church law in the northwestern German city of Münster. In the past, he adds, the number of cases that became known was "negligibly small."

Problem of Definition

Nevertheless, the Church would prefer to use precisely these procedures to discipline its "sinful" priests. However, it is not even sure how to define the crimes. One option is to refer to them as a "delictum contra mores," or a crime against morals, while another is to apply the Sixth Commandment ("You shall not commit adultery"). The problem with the second approach is that the perpetrators are never married, while their victims are rarely married.

The penalties -- transfer or excommunication -- fall well short of the penalties of secular criminal law, while the extenuating circumstances that can be applied to reduce penalties are generous. One of those circumstances involves otherwise celibate priests being swept away by a "storm of passion" ("gravis passionis aestus").

Besides, a willingness to do penitence, express remorse and amend one's ways normally placates those passing judgment. In any case, details about decisions are very hard to obtain: The verdicts are secret and disappear, as a "secretum pontificium," into sealed archives.

The German Bishops' Conference likes to point to a set of "guidelines," which it approved in 2002, on how to respond to suspicions of sexual abuse. Secretary Hans Langendörfer describes it as "an important step." "We want to address the subject openly, which is what we have been doing since 2002, at the latest," he says.

Code of Secrecy

But upon closer inspection, even these guidelines are pervaded by the Church's way of thinking, as affirmed by the Holy See in 1962 under Pope John XXIII and once again in 2001. According to those guidelines, which remain in force today, potential cases of abuse must be reported to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The guidelines also forbid bishops worldwide from taking any steps beyond an initial investigation of accusations without direct instructions from Rome. The entire procedure is subject to "pontifical secrecy," the second-highest level of secrecy within the Holy See. Anyone who violates this code of secrecy without papal permission can be punished.

The guidelines of the German Bishops' Conference are worded accordingly and emphasize the primacy of discreet internal investigations. Before making a decision, each bishop must first consider ways to protect the reputation of the priest and the Church. When Rome takes over the investigations, some abuse cases can be quietly dealt with in secret trials.

Based on its own canonical law, the German Catholic Church does not feel obligated to immediately report cases of abuse within its own ranks to the German authorities, so that the authorities can conduct house searches, for example. Critics say that the Church is exposing itself to charges of obstruction of justice, as long as the clergy handles cases purely on an internal basis.

Critical Catholic groups have long sought to change the Bishops' Conference guidelines, but to no avail. Bernd Göhrig, the executive director of a group called the Church from Below, calls for the establishment of independent ombudsmen to address the concerns of the victims, instead of the biased representatives of the diocese. This is probably the only viable option, given that the German bishops are as reluctant to address the issue of prohibited sex as the German pope.

No Need to Act

Even after the massive abuse scandal in the United States in 2002, Cardinal Karl Lehmann, the bishop of the southwestern German city of Mainz and the head of the German Catholic Church at the time, felt no particular need to take action. "We don't have a problem of the same dimension (as in the American Church)," he told SPIEGEL in an interview at the time. In his diocese, he said, anyone who "is truly a pedophile is immediately removed from pastoral service." These kinds of people, he said, could "not simply be transferred to a different location."

Only a few weeks later, however, Lehmann was confronted with a new case of abuse inside his own diocese, in a parish near Darmstadt. A few months earlier, parents in a small city near Frankfurt had discovered, to their dismay, that the new director of their children's choir, Father E., was the same man who had been forced to leave his previous parish because of questionable relationships with minors. Lehmann's system had already shuffled the priest around several times from one location to another.

The Diocese of Aachen, in western Germany, also showed little willingness to change its traditional approach in a recent case. Although the personnel department of the diocese knew that Father Georg K. had been inviting underage altar boys into his private sauna in the rectory, the man was simply transferred to a German overseas congregation in South Africa.

But K. immediately attracted attention to himself after attending a retreat with children who were about to take their first communion. Investigators believe he made improper advances to them in the dormitory. K.'s new parish had not been informed about the incident at his former parish. It was only when people involved in the case contacted the media that the church reacted, announcing that a special Church official assigned to abuse cases was dealing with it and that people should contact him with any information -- preferably "exonerating" as well as "incriminating."

Investigations Drag On Without Results

Meanwhile in Berlin, Cardinal Georg Sterzinsky has been aware of allegations against a priest in the Holy Cross parish since July 2009. Even though this case could soon pass the statute of limitations -- the accusations relate to incidents that allegedly occurred in 2001 -- an internal investigation by an "independent" Berlin church commission has dragged on. An investigation, albeit secret, was also initiated at the Vatican. It was left up to the victim, however, to report the abuse allegations to the police.

Such abuse cases, which happened only a few months or years ago, show that, despite its claims to the contrary, the church has done little to change its position. This coincides with the perceptions of Johannes Heibel, who works for a Germany-wide association that counsels victims of sexual violence and who has worked with people who were abused by priests for many years. "The traditional approach -- keep it quiet, cover it up, transfer the offender -- is by no means a thing of the past," he says.

"You aren't concerned about the victims, but mainly about making sure that nothing gets out in the media," said one abused adolescent, in an accusation directed at Regensburg Bishop Gerhard Müller. A chaplain had grabbed him in the crotch in 1999.

A Church Pays Hush Money

Instead of investigating the case and putting the chaplain on trial, the abusive chaplain, acting through the episcopal ordinariate, paid the family what amounted to damages for pain and suffering as well as hush money. Then the man was transferred to another parish, which was not informed about the abuse allegations, and where new cases of abuse were reported in 2003.

Incidents in reform schools, which counted a total of 220,000 students in the early 1960s, have also remained largely unresolved until now. Michael-Peter Schiltsky, who was abused several times by deacons while in a church home in Westuffeln in the western state of Hesse, has compiled the reports of many fellow abuse victims, including 40 from Catholic homes. One of the accounts is by Peter Rueth, a

former altar boy in a home run by the Salvatorians near the northwestern city of Paderborn:

"One morning, when he was alone in the vestry with me, a priest closed the door to hear my confession before mass. He said: Only a pure spirit can serve God. I had to sit on a chair. Then the priest blindfolded me with his stole and tied my hands with another piece of material, saying that he had to do this because you weren't supposed to see the other person during confession. He asked me to talk about my sins, and when I confessed, he told me that, as punishment, I should open my mouth so that he could place a sponge dipped in vinegar inside, just like the sponge that was once offered to the Lord on the cross."

After the ensuing oral sex, the boy was told to recite the Lord's Prayer three times and then wash out his mouth.

Statutes of Limitation One of Biggest Problems for Victims

Heinz-Jürgen Overfeld, a Berlin native, was in the same home run by the Salvatorians. Two weeks ago, he wrote a letter to German President Horst Köhler, asking him to strip another priest from that home of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany, because the priest had also molested children. Overfeld has since confronted the offender, but the elderly priest's only response was that the statute of limitations has expired on anything that might have happened in the past.

"As far as I'm concerned, nothing is statute-barred," Overfeld writes to Köhler. "It's all coming back." The president has yet to respond to Overfeld's letter.

Statutes of limitation are one of the biggest problems for victims of abuse. Such sex crimes generally become statute-barred after 10 years in Germany, beginning with the victim's 18th birthday. In other words, someone who was abused at 13 must report the incident to the authorities before he turns 28, or the offender will remain unpunished. Claims for damages expire three years after the victim's 21st birthday.

Another church victim, Norbert Denef, has already collected 7,000 signatures as part of an initiative to have the statute of limitations lifted or extended, at least under civil law, so that victims can at least hope for financial compensation. In a previously unprecedented case Denef, after a longstanding dispute over a gag order, finally received a €25,000 award for pain and suffering from the Magdeburg Diocese in eastern Germany.

For the church, a serious effort to confront its own sexual morals should be just as important as it is to address the legal ramifications.

"If you are forced, by virtue of your profession, to live a life without a wife and children, there is a great risk that healthy integration of sexuality will fail, which can lead to pedophile acts, for example," theologian Hans Küng wrote in SPIEGEL in 2005. "In addition to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, it would make sense for Rome to establish a Congregation for the Doctrine of Love, which would examine every decree issued by the Curia to ensure that it is in keeping with the Christian concept of love."

His fellow theologian Eugen Drewermann writes of a "church structure that is repressive in emotional areas and on questions of love." Because of these and similar views, the Vatican has revoked both theologians' permission to teach.

Celibacy, which has only been a general requirement since 1139, is seen as the main reason for the repressed accumulation of sexual urges, which sometimes erupts in brutal ways, within the clergy. Celibacy and the prohibition of marriage are rigorous standards that not all members of the clergy can live up to.

Although surveys and studies have produced a wide range of figures on the sexual behaviors of Catholic priests, they all arrive at the same conclusion: Very often, the sanctimonious show of chastity in the church is at odds with reality. According to a US survey, two-thirds of priests adhere to their vows of chastity, while the rest have sex in all shapes and forms: heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual, monogamous, promiscuous.

2 Percent of Priests Pedophiles

There is widespread agreement that this climate of repressed sexuality promotes sexual molestation of children in schools, homes and parishes. A number of studies in the United States conclude that about 2 percent of all Catholic priests are pedophiles.

When applied to Germany, this figure suggests that of a total of 20,000 Catholic clergy, at least 400 could

potentially be pedophiles.

Such research has prompted lay movements like "We are Church" to call upon bishops to engage in a fundamental discussion of sexuality. The movement cites a structural problem, in which strict sexual morality and an authoritarian system combine to form a dangerous mix. But the bishops refuse to even entertain such a discussion.

Wunibald Müller also calls for the end of celibacy and the ordination of women, saying that both are "a form of prevention." Müller, a Catholic theologian and psychologist at the Münsterschwarzach Benedictine Abbey, advises priests confronted with serious crises. He has argued for more openness in matters of sex for years, and says: "The experience of pain and suffering can lead us to God, but so can eroticism and sexual passion."

Müller insists that members of the clergy must address their sexuality. "They cannot suppress this area, or else it will find ways to slip out and cause problems for other people."

Inhibited Attitudes Toward Homosexuality

The Vatican's attitudes toward homosexuality are particularly inhibited, despite the fact that it is somewhat widespread within the church and appears to be relatively tolerated, as long as it is not discussed. Because the Vatican considers practicing homosexuality a sin, and because it has even required tests designed to keep gays out of the priesthood for the past few years, many gay clergy suppress their feelings. Müller cites an "immature homosexuality" that makes some priests "susceptible" in their interactions with young people.

Taboos have been lifted from sexuality in almost all areas of society in recent years, making it easier for victims to come forward. The church, however, continues to cling to its centuries-old moral values. According to Müller, many priests who become sex offenders have never learned to develop close and intimate relationships. Some, he adds, have not progressed beyond childhood levels of sexuality or have developed other sexual problems. Nevertheless, they would never dare to confess to such problems or even enter into therapy.

In light of its recruitment problems, the church accepts almost anyone who decides to become a priest. However, few in the official church are willing to admit that the new recruits include more and more young men who find the priesthood so appealing in part because they believe it will allow them to conceal their sexual problems.

It is a vicious circle. Fewer and fewer young men are taking the vows of priesthood -- only about 100 were ordained in 2008 -- while the overwhelming majority of the 20,000 pastors and deacons in the German Catholic church were educated in the archconservative, sexually repressed church environment of the 1950s, '60s and '70s. This is particularly true of many senior clergy in the dioceses, who, as a result, have left the young priests alone with their problem far too long.

Experts agree that radical changes in seminaries are necessary, and that important questions must be addressed: How emotionally mature are the candidates? How can open discussions be initiated with those who may need help, and how can they be convinced to accept offers of assistance?

Celibacy: A Senselessly Wasted Life or Gift of the Holy Spirit?

But the official church stubbornly adheres to the vow of celibacy and the prohibition on marriage, as if this were a guarantee of -- and not, perhaps, a threat to -- its continued existence.

Bishops, like Wilhelm Schraml of the Diocese of Passau in Bavaria, constantly glorify the "voluntary celibate way of life," which they say has proved to be successful for hundreds of years. In a recent pastoral letter, Cologne Cardinal Joachim Meisner even described the priesthood as a "beneficial sign of provocation" against the mainstream. In a society of hectic pleasure, Meisner wrote, the celibate life of a priest could even be perceived "as a senselessly wasted life," but must in reality be seen as a precious gift of the Holy Spirit.

Klaus Beier, one of Germany's most prominent medical experts on sexuality, initiated the Dunkelfeld Prevention Project at Berlin's Charité University Hospital to help pedophile men. Some of the men who have participated in the project are religious, and for them the path to his institute was particularly difficult. Beier has assessed a number of priests, including members of orders, sometimes in the context of trials and sometimes in response to a church's request.

"First they have to conclude that their faith hasn't helped them," says Beier. "Who can talk openly about his proclivities when even sexual fantasy is considered a sin?"

But prevention is more important than ever in the church, says Beier, because "the orders have a particularly strong appeal for people with pedophile preferences."

Beier, who is convinced that priests can be helped, offered his support to the Vatican in a letter to Pope Benedict XVI in the autumn of 2008. His clinical experiences, he wrote to the Holy Father, could "be of great benefit to affected members of the clergy."

Surprisingly enough, the Vatican responded to Beier's letter. "On behalf of the Holy See, I wish to thank you for your concern about the welfare of children and your efforts to provide appropriate assistance to those affected," an official with the Vatican Secretariat of State wrote. Beier's remarks, he added, would be "carefully acknowledged and forwarded to the appropriate officials."

A turning point? Hardly. Beier's letter probably ended up in the secret archives of the Curia, together with the many records of internal church proceedings.

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