

German Protestant church issues apology for sexual abuse by clerics: "We ask the victims for forgiveness"

News in the [April 20, 2010](#) issue

The Evangelical Church in the Rhineland, the second largest Protestant Church in Germany, is the latest church body to apologize to victims of sexual abuse in their institutions.

The vice-president of the church, Petra Bosse-Huber, said on March 22 in Duesseldorf, "We are ashamed and upset that such infringements apparently also happened in our church and in our social welfare department. We ask the victims for forgiveness."

Her apology came just days after Pope Benedict XVI apologized for abuses that had occurred in Roman Catholic institutions in Ireland and been kept under wraps for decades. Irish bishops, Benedict said, had "failed, at times grievously, to apply the long-established norms of canon law to the crime of child abuse," thus enabling abusers to strike again.

The pope accepted the resignation on March 24 of Bishop John Magee, a former papal aide who in turn apologized to victims of priests who were involved in parish work after he was appointed bishop of the Irish diocese of Cloyne in 1987.

In the Protestant announcement, Bosse-Huber said that nine men and women have reported incidents of sexual abuse and physical violence that occurred in institutions of the Protestant church, some of them decades ago. "We take these accounts very seriously," Bosse-Huber said in a statement.

Many of the cases are now crimes that can no longer be prosecuted, but Bosse-Huber insisted that her church is interested in getting to the bottom of the accusations. "We are investigating the accusations of sexual assault and abuse just as much as the suspicion of a cover-up," said Bosse-Huber.

In 2003 the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland set up structures to help victims of abuse and to prosecute the offenders. Victims are offered psychological and pastoral therapy, while the offenders are disciplined by the church and charged by the state.

The statement by the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland is the latest in a spate of exposés and allegations of sexual abuse by clerics in Germany, Austria and Netherlands.

The spotlight in Germany, especially in Munich where Ratzinger was once a cardinal, has been drawing closer to the pope himself.

A psychiatrist has charged that the Archdiocese of Munich ignored his warnings about priest Peter Hullermann during the time that Ratzinger served as cardinal there. Ratzinger led the Munich archdiocese from 1977 to 1982.

In 1980, Ratzinger agreed to accept the transfer of Hullermann, an accused pedophile, from another German diocese so that the priest could receive treatment in Munich. Shortly after beginning his therapy, Hullermann was reassigned to work in a parish, a decision for which a former vicar general under Ratzinger has claimed “full responsibility.”

Five years later, Hullermann was again accused of sexually abusing minors and was convicted the following year, although he continued to serve as a priest until the Munich archdiocese suspended him on March 15.

The Munich archdiocese has received about 120 complaints of physical and sexual abuse, with new reports coming in daily, said Elke Huemmeler, the head of its new sexual abuse prevention task force. “It is like a tsunami,” she told Associated Press on March 19.

Prosecutors in Germany have begun investigations involving Catholic schools since the start of the year. Charges emerged earlier in March that members of a boys’ choir directed for 30 years by the pope’s elder brother, Monsignor Georg Ratzinger, were also physically and sexually abused by priests. Ratzinger admitted slapping children but said he was unaware of any sexual abuse.

The German magazine *Der Spiegel* reported March 22 that it had seen documents showing that as archbishop of Munich and Freising in 1980, Ratzinger, who is now the pope, knew of priest Peter Hullermann’s pedophilic tendencies when he was

moved to his diocese but did not report it to the authorities.

In an interview published March 23 in the Italian newspaper *Repubblica*, Irish writer Joseph O'Connor said that Benedict XVI should resign for his "moral responsibilities" relating to clergy pedophilia. -*Ecumenical News International, Religion News Service*