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Sex scandals come home for the Vatican

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 5, 2010 NCR Today

tAs sexual scandals of various sorts have washed through the Catholic church around the world, the Vatican has typically tried to play a subordinate role ? treating them as matters of grave concern, to be sure, but ultimately something for which local bishops must take the primary responsibility.

tTwo developments this week, however, bring those scandals home for the Holy See. One involves two lay Vatican employees fired after reportedly being caught up in a gay prostitution ring, the other turns on reports of abuse by priests connected to a German choir once directed by the pope?s brother.

tThe first story centers on an Italian layman named Angelo Balducci, a prominent public works official in Italy who was already at the center of controversy as a result of corruption charges. Balducci, who has enjoyed close relations with senior figures in both the Vatican and the Italian church, has denied any wrongdoing.

This week, Italian papers published transcripts of wiretaps that show Balducci apparently discussing the solicitation of gay prostitutes with a Nigerian in Rome named Ghinedu Ehiem. (Early media reports suggested that Ehiem was a member of a religious order, but the Vatican has denied that.)

tBoth men have Vatican ties: Ehiem sang in a chorus in St. Peter?s Basilica, while Balducci served as a ?papal gentleman,? or ?gentleman of His Holiness,? an honor typically reserved for distinguished laymen whose families have long-standing ties to the Vatican. The papal gentlemen are the tuxedo-clad ushers who escort visiting dignitaries when they meet the pope, and who seat VIPs during major papal events.

Both Balducci and Ehiem have been relieved of their positions in the Vatican, according to a report in the Italian news agency ANSA.

tThose reports also suggest that at least some of the encounters Ehiem and Balducci discussed may have involved clergy, religious or seminarians. As Ehiem describes one potential encounter, Balducci is quoted as asking: ?What time does he have to go back to the seminary??

tMeanwhile in Germany, Bishop Gerhard Ludwig Müller of Regensburg has released a letter acknowledging that a former member of the famed *Domspatzen*, or choir, in Regensburg has claimed that he was sexually abused by priests in the early 1960s.

Monsignor Georg Ratzinger, the brother of Pope Benedict XVI, served as *Domkapellmeister*, or conductor, of that choir (known as the ?Sparrow?s Choir?) from 1964 to 1994. A mixed group of men and boys, the choir put out several successful recordings under Ratzinger and toured the world. In 1965, the choir performed under Ratzinger?s direction at the closing session of Vatican II.

There is no suggestion, according to media reports, that Ratzinger himself was involved in any abuse, and a spokesperson for the choir said the alleged abuse happened before Ratzinger took over. Ratzinger told a Bavarian public radio service on Friday that he was not aware of any such cases.

Georg Ratzinger was made a monsignor in 1968, and eventually raised to the rank of ?Apostolic Pronotary,? the highest grade of monsignor. He holds the Bavarian Order of Merit for his work with the Regensburg choir.

tAccording to the choir spokesperson, the abuse is alleged to have been committed by two members of religious orders, both of whom died in the 1980s. One reportedly worked at a school attended by members of the choir, the other directed a residence connected to the school.

tA Vatican spokesperson said this week that while the Vatican is following the unfolding sexual abuse crisis in Germany closely, it has no plans to intervene directly with regard to the Regensburg choir.

tAfter initial revelations centering on a Jesuit-run academy in Berlin, reports of sexual abuse committed by priests, religious and lay employees of the Catholic church have surfaced across Germany. The president of the German bishops? conference, Archbishop Robert Zollitsch of Freiburg, has issued a public apology in the name of the church, and is scheduled to discuss the crisis with the pope on March 12.

tMeanwhile, Holland has become the latest nation where a sex abuse scandal appears to be brewing.

According to a Dutch newspaper, accusations of abuse have been lodged against ten priests who worked at a Salesian-run college between 1959 and 1971. Bishop Adrian van Luyn of Rotterdam, president of the Dutch bishops? conference, has announced an investigation, as has the country?s Minister of Justice.

tSources in Holland have told reporters that if the pattern observed in other countries holds, both the number of accusations and the number of church-affiliated institutions involved may mount in the days ahead.

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