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Sex abuse reports spread in Europe; focus on pope

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Pope Benedict XVI is greets Archbishop Robert Zollitsch of Freiburg, head of the German bishops' conference, during a meeting at the Vatican March 12. After meeting with the pope, Archbishop Zollitsch apologized to victims of child abuse by priests.(CNS photo)

Pope Benedict XVI was implicated in the deepening sex abuse scandal for the first time late Friday following disclosures that he ws involved in the transfer a priest who had forced an 11-year-old boy to have sex.

The priest, who was named by Germany's *Südeutsche Zeitung* only as priest "H", was transferred in 1980 from his parish in the German town of Essen to the Pope's former diocese in Munich after he was accused of forcing the boy to perform sex acts.

The priest was sent to Munich to undergo therapy, but six years later he was convicted of abusing minors. He was given an 18-month suspended prison sentence and fined. The newspaper said that he continues to work as a priest in Bavaria.

Pope Benedict was archbishop of Munich between 1977 and 1982.

The report became public only hours after the pope had a 45-minute meeting with the president of the German Bishops? Conference, Archbishop of Freiburg Robert Zollitsch.

Following his meeting with the pope, Zollitsch held a news conference at the Vatican during which he again apologised to the victims of sex abuse, while stressing that the pope had expressed full approval for the manner in which the German church was handling the scandal.

Friday a senior church official acknowledged the Munich archdiocese had made ?serious mistakes? its handling of the abuse.

According to a report in [2]in *The New York Times*, the Munich archdiocese said that the offending priest was given therapy in 1980 and later allowed to resume pastoral duties, before committing further abuses and being prosecuted.

Pope Benedict at the time headed the archdiocese of Munich and Freising.

The priest was moved to Munich in January 1980, where he was supposed to undergo therapy, a decision that was taken ?with the approval of the archbishop,? according to the archdiocese?s statement, as reported in he *Times*.

Late Friday the Vatican press office said in a brief statement that the archdiocesan official who made the decision to transfer the priest had taken "full responsibility" for the decision, according to Catholic News Service.

The Munich archdiocese said in a statement Friday that then-Archbishop Joseph Ratzinger was involved in the decision to let the priest stay at a rectory in Munich while undergoing therapy after the accusation surfaced.

The archdiocese said that later Father Gerhard Gruber, vicar general at the time, allowed the priest to return to pastoral work after therapy and that the future pope was not involved in the decision.

The archdiocese's response came after the Germany daily newspaper *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* *[3]*reported on the case in its March 13 edition.

The archdiocese said no accusations of abuse were made against the priest between February 1980 and August 1982 during his time in Munich.

The priest returned to ministry in nearby Grafing where he worked until early 1985 when new accusations of sexual abuse were made, the archdiocese said.

On Jan. 29, 1985, he was suspended from the priesthood and in 1986 he was convicted of sexually abusing minors, the archdiocese said. He was sentenced to 18 months in jail, placed on five years probation, was fined about $1,000 and ordered to undergo psychotherapy, according to the archdiocese.

After the conviction, the priest worked in a nursing home between November 1986 and October 1987, the archdiocese said. He then worked in a parish in Garching/Alz -- first as an assistant pastor and then pastor -- until September 2008, according to the archdiocese.

"The relatively mild sentence of the Ebersberg Court and the observations of the psychologists who treated him were decisive in his being sent back to parish work," the archdiocese said.

The archdiocese also said the priest was relieved of his duties at the parish when Archbishop Reinhard Marx, who was installed in 2007, decided the priest should not remain in parish work. He was assigned as a chaplain at a resort and instructed to "do no further work with children, young people or altar servers," the archdiocese said.

The archdiocese added that after the conviction, it was unaware of further incidents involving the priest.

The Rev. Thomas P. Doyle, who once worked at the Vatican Embassy in Washington and became an early and well-known whistle-blower on sexual abuse in the church, said the claim that the vicar general allowed the

abusive priest to return to pastoral work without then-Archbishop Ratzinger's knowledge was not credible, according to the *Times* report.

?Nonsense,? said Father Doyle, who has served as an expert witness in sexual abuse lawsuits. ?Pope Benedict is a micromanager. He?s the old style. Anything like that would necessarily have been brought to his attention. Tell the vicar general to find a better line. What he?s trying to do, obviously, is protect the pope.?

Meanwhile, in the wake of the latest sex abuse claims, severalsenior clergy have called for a debate [4]on the issue of celibacy in the priesthood.

ABC News and other media reported Friday that the Archbishop of Vienna called for a thorough examination of the link between celibacy and child sex abuse by priests and the Archbishop of Salzburg asked whether it was an appropriate way of life for priests today.

But overnight, Pope Benedict quashed any suggestions of a change in the vow of celibacy, calling it the ultimate commitment to God.
Father Thomas Williams, a Catholic priest and professor of theology and ethics in Rome, says there needs to be more study into any links between clerical celibacy and child abuse.

"I think studies need to be done and we need to know whether there is a causal relationship," he said, according to the ABC News report.

"Is, for example, the incident of child abuse higher among celibate clergy than it is among, for example, non-celibate clergy of other faiths to start?

"Or is it higher among celibate clergy - Catholic priests for example - than it is among other people that work with children; so in public schools, the boy scouts; whatever.

"These are studies that need to be done."

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