

Memo to Munich: Get it Out Now!

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 19, 2010 All Things Catholic

Cardinal Sean Brady of Ireland, currently under fire for his role in an investigation of sex abuse claims against a priest in the 1970s, delivered a homily on St. Patrick's Day calling for a "sincere, wholehearted and truthful acknowledgement of our sinfulness," insisting that the Irish bishops must "own up to, and take responsibility for, any mismanagement or cover-up of child abuse."

"We have to stop the drip, drip, drip of revelations of failure," Brady said.

That's excellent advice, and especially pertinent at the moment for church officials in Munich, as well as the Vatican, with regard to the record of Pope Benedict XVI during the time he served as Archbishop of Munich from May 1977 to February 1982.

Pope Benedict found himself in the headlines this week, related to the mushrooming sexual abuse crisis in Germany. As that story unfolded, a case came to light of a priest from another diocese, Peter Hullermann, who had been accused of sexual abuse of boys -- including, reportedly, forcing an 11-year-old to perform oral sex -- and sent to Munich for therapy in 1980, while then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was in charge. Though Ratzinger was informed of Hullermann's presence, he apparently placed no restrictions on him. Hullermann was later given a pastoral assignment in Munich in September 1982 (after Ratzinger had left for Rome) where he committed other acts of abuse, for which he was criminally convicted in 1986.

Perhaps predictably, the Vatican has bristled at efforts to use the Hullerman case to implicate Benedict XVI in the broader crisis. Italian Archbishop Rino Fisichella of the Pontifical Academy for Life called such attempts a "sign of violence and barbarity," while Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's Secretary of State, asserted that "someone is trying to undermine" the trust Catholics have in the church.

At one level, the reaction is understandable. We're talking about a single case from three decades ago, in which Benedict's role was marginal. The most shocking twist -- that Hullermann continued serving as a priest after his conviction, though apparently without any further allegations against him -- happened well after the pope was gone.

There's also a natural desire to protect a figure one reveres, especially someone who, in the eyes of Benedict's admirers, has already taken more than his fair share of lumps.

In any event, one could reasonably conclude that whatever Benedict XVI did or didn't do in 1980 is far less important than the policies he's pursuing as pope today, and the sexual abuse crisis is one area where many people would give him fairly high marks. Benedict XVI has disciplined high-profile Roman priests previously regarded as untouchable, demonstrating that no one gets a free pass. He's been the first pope to meet with victims, the first to speak so openly about the crisis, and the first to apologize directly in his own name.

And yet.

And yet, if we have learned anything from the trajectory of this crisis in other parts of the world, it is that one allegation, one report, one case, tends to generate many others. The inevitable question thus becomes: Was Hullermann an isolated case? Or, are there other examples of abuser-priests who served in Munich during the period that Benedict XVI was archbishop, and who were reassigned or shuffled around?

You can bet the farm that journalists, victims' advocates, and lawyers are feverishly searching right now for other such cases.

Whatever the merits of that quest -- whether it's about grinding an axe against the pope or the church, or simply a desire for truth -- it sets the scene for precisely the sort of "drip, drip, drip" of bad news that Brady described, this time concerning the pope himself. That could tie down the Vatican, and the entire church, indefinitely.

What makes Benedict's record in Munich potentially explosive is that from the beginning, the "sexual abuse crisis" has been composed of two interlocking, but distinct, problems: the priests who abused, and the bishops who failed to clean it up. Especially if Hullerman is not an isolated case, critics will ask: Can Benedict XVI credibly demand greater accountability from bishops, if his own record as a diocesan leader reflects the same pattern of neglect?

Given the way that question strikes at the pope's ability to lead the church out of this mess, one understands why Benedict's allies and aides are not exactly thrilled about the hunt for additional Hullermans.

This, however, is where Brady's insight comes into play. Whatever the truth may be, it's far better for the pope, and the church, to get it out now. The alternative is death by a thousand cuts, not to mention the constant anxiety bred by fear that the next damaging revelation may be just around the corner.

True friends of the pope, both in Rome and in Munich, ought to be pressing for full disclosure. The Munich archdiocese could publish a comprehensive list of every priest, diocesan and religious, who served in the archdiocese between May 1977 and February 1982, along with whatever information church officials had at the time about any accusations against them, and what was done. Church officials in Munich could invite responsible journalists or investigators to examine the records independently, obviously with the understanding that in the case of false or unproven allegations, confidentiality of the parties would be preserved. The idea would be to reassure public opinion that the church isn't holding anything back, that this is indeed complete transparency.

It may well be, of course, that such an examination doesn't simply produce bad news for Benedict. On the contrary, it's entirely possible that there may be an "anti-Hullermann" story or two buried in the archives, cases where then-Cardinal Ratzinger acted decisively. If so, that, too, needs to see the light of day.

Whatever the record may show, it's a matter of serving the common good of the church -- not to mention the future of Benedict's papacy -- to establish it fully and quickly. If you don't believe that, just ask Cardinal Brady.

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