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Scandal hits close to popeís home

Thomas C. Fox | Mar. 29, 2010

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

MUNICH, GERMANY -- Ever since it was reported here earlier this month that a priest suspected of child abuse entered the Munich and Freising archdiocese for treatment in 1980, was eventually allowed to do parish work, and went on to abuse more children, Catholics here have speculated about the complicity of their former archbishop, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, in the debacle.

Such speculation is at the center of wider interest, marked by both outrage and shame, as Catholics painfully follow German media reports of new sex abuse cases that seem to surface almost daily. In all, more than 250 cases of abuse have emerged, dating back five decades.

The connection of Ratzinger -- now Pope Benedict XVI -- to these scandals is personal. He came from this area of southern Germany and was archbishop here from 1977 to 1982. Catholics here feel connected to the pope by dint of nationality, regardless of how they felt about him as a local church leader. As archbishop, he was to his critics a polarizing figure, aloof and impersonal, and to his admirers demanding and precise on matters of orthodoxy.

As the scandal continued to spread here, a report by *The New York Times* further implicated the pope in mishandling cases during his time as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith from 1981 to 2005. The paper reported that Vatican officials, including Ratzinger, did nothing about a priest who molested as many as 200 deaf boys, ?even though several American bishops repeatedly warned them that failure to act on the matter could embarrass the church.?

The March 24 story cites documents that are part of a lawsuit involving Fr. Lawrence C. Murphy, who died in 1998. He was accused of molesting students while teaching at a school for the deaf. ?The internal correspondence from bishops in Wisconsin directly to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the future pope, shows that while church officials tussled over whether the priest should be dismissed, their highest priority was protecting the church from scandal,? the *Times* reported.

Curiously, some who claim Ratzinger was aloof as archbishop of Munich now say he must have known about the worst of the sex scandals while those who viewed him as paying attention to proper procedures then now claim that as archbishop, he largely left management to others.

How Ratzinger managed the archdiocese more than three decades ago is suddenly pertinent again, and has become another cause for division among Catholics who eagerly await their former archbishop to address it.

So far, however, they have heard nothing. Catholics here very much wanted to be included in the message Benedict delivered to the church of Ireland this month. Some wanted a direct apology; others, at least heartfelt solace. Absent either, speculation concerning the role Benedict played -- what he knew and his possible involvement in cover-up of sex abuse cases -- has only grown.

Catholics here hold to one of three broad lines of speculation as they talk about the sex abuse cases in general and the handling of the 1980 transfer case in particular: 1) Ratzinger didn?t know; 2) he did know; 3) it doesn?t matter -- he was in charge and should now take responsibility.

Earlier this month a German newspaper, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, first reported that Ratzinger approved the transfer of a child abuser priest from the western German city of Essen into Munich for therapy. The move was confirmed by the Munich archdiocese, which said it became aware of the case only when it appeared in the paper.

The priest, Fr. Peter Hullermann, had been accused of molesting an 11-year-old boy. After entering the archdiocese, he was assigned to do parish work and in 1986 was convicted of other acts of child sex abuse and given an 18-month suspended sentence.

Archdiocesan officials emphasized that there were no accusations against Hullermann relating to his time in Munich, from 1980 to 1982. They pointed out he was convicted of sexually abusing minors during the time he was in a parish in nearby Grafing between 1982 and 1985.

As for the role of Ratzinger, both the archdiocese and the Vatican insisted he had no knowledge of the decision to have Hullermann put into a parish.

The ?Cardinal Ratzinger did not know? line of thought was bolstered by statements made by his former vicar general, Fr. Gerhard Gruber, who told The Associated Press that he accepted ?full responsibility? for the decision. In a phone call, Gruber said he was in sole charge of priest staffing decisions at the time. ?Personnel matters were delegate ed,? Gruber said. ?I decided that on my own.?

Gruber has since disappeared from public sight.

Muddying this line of thought somewhat, however, are statements the psychiatrist who treated Hullermann made to *The New York Times* and *TIME* magazine. Dr. Werner Huth said he repeatedly warned archdiocesan officials that Hullermann should never be allowed to have any dealings with minors.

?I said, for God?s sake, he desperately has to be kept away from working with children,? the Munich psychiatrist told the *Times*.

Hullermann was allowed to resume his pastoral duties and was only suspended from his responsibilities in March of this year.

The ?Cardinal Ratzinger did not know? argument has been repeated by archdiocesan officials here who say that when he was archbishop he would not have been aware of any specific priest movement decisions because his

caseload was simply too big.

?You have to know that we had some 1,000 priests in the diocese at the time,? Gruber said. ?The cardinal could not deal with everything. He had to rely on his vicar general.?

The ?He did know? line of thought, based more on intuition than solid evidence, seems to carry favor among many Catholics here, particularly those prone to have been critical of their archbishop then and their pope now. No one has come forward with conclusive evidence that Ratzinger knew of the Hullermann transfer.

As the ?He didn?t know? defense is often argued based on the idea that Ratzinger, as archbishop, was not involved in the detail work of the archdiocese, the ?He knew? argument is based on a counter viewpoint that he was a micromanager in matters that were important to him, and that priest formation and activity was one such matter.

Dr. Edgar Büttner was a priest in a neighboring diocese during the time the pope served as archbishop here. Büttner has been laicized and now lives in Munich. He no longer works for the church. He told *NCR* that Ratzinger, while essentially an intellectual and not a pastor at heart, had a keen mind for management as a means of asserting orthodoxy.

?I find it unbelievable,? he said, ?that Ratzinger was unaware of this [Hullermann] case.?

A woman who worked with Ratzinger within his chancery while he was archbishop here concurred with Büttner?s assessment. She asked, however, that her name be withheld as she says she is vulnerable to personal attacks in her retirement.

The woman said that the Hullermann case is more complex than has been reported. Explaining she had no involvement or direct knowledge of the transfer, she said it is a story of good intentions gone sour. What she said is not well understood is that a priest coming into the archdiocese at the time for therapy would not necessarily be precluded from doing some parish work.

Asked if she believed archdiocesan officials are being untruthful, she responded, ?It is more likely the whole story is not being told.?

?Lot of people are talking about this,? she said, adding that the further they are away from information the more likely they are to judge Benedict and archdiocesan officials to be covering the truth. Her point was that the credibility of Catholic officials has been hurt badly.

The third line of thought, the ?It doesn?t matter? reasoning, also had a good number of adherents. The most public proponent of this thinking has been theologian Fr. Hans Küng, Swiss in origin, but who works out of the German University of Tübingen.

?Is it not time for Pope Benedict XVI himself to acknowledge his share of responsibility?? Küng wrote in a newspaper here. ?Honesty demands that Joseph Ratzinger himself, the man who for decades has been principally responsible for the worldwide cover-up, at last pronounce his own mea culpa.?

Küng's demand for accountability has been echoed in the German press. His argument is held by many Catholics who seem to have given up on local church leaders. These Catholics say they have been deeply hurt by the revelations and express reactions ranging from sadness, to anger, to disgust.

One such Catholic, a 63-year-old Munich teacher, e-mailed this reporter. Referring to the scandal, Brigitte Beierlein wrote: ?I quit [the church] yesterday,? a step that in Germany requires a formal notice to the

government. ?It only cost 31 euros.?

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