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British historian: Church has not learned from abuse in past centuries

Jonathan Luxmoore Catholic News Service | Jun. 14, 2012

OXFORD, England -- A top church historian said the Catholic church has failed to learn lessons from sexual abuse by clergy and cited evidence the problem also was mishandled in previous centuries.

"Unlike his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI has seen the necessity of reacting strongly to abuse, but the Vatican still isn't facing up to the reasons for it -- in particular, its connection with universal clerical celibacy," said Diarmaid MacCulloch, professor of the history of the church at Oxford University.

"Rome is still vehemently denying any such connection, but to me as a historian it's blindly obvious. The church will be in trouble if it doesn't tackle the root causes," MacCulloch told Catholic News Service on Monday.

He said complaints of a cover-up of sexual abuse had been widespread in 17th-century Italy, when celibacy was made compulsory for all Catholic priests during the Counter-Reformation.

He added that he had examined archives belonging to the Piarist order after its foundation in Florence in 1621 and found "depressing parallels" with cases of abuse in the 1970s and 1980s.

The order's Spanish founder, St. Joseph Calasanz, had written repeatedly to a senior order member, Fr. Stefano Cherubini, after hearing of abuse at the order's school in Naples. At least once the founder urged the priest not to allow the scandal "to come into the hands of outsiders," MacCulloch said.

Italian society was aware of abuse within the order, which was dissolved by Pope Innocent X in 1646, three years after Cherubini became its superior. The order, later refounded, continued to run free schools, whose pupils included Pope Pius IX.

"The same instinct kicked in and exactly the same was said -- that all mention of abuse should be suppressed, since it was more important to keep the good name of the church intact than to do justice to victims," the historian said.

"There was a clear connection between the new requirement of celibacy and emotional dislocations among clergy, at a time when their status in society was being enhanced and they were almost being seen as a different sort of human being," he added.

MacCulloch, a specialist in early modern history and a fellow of the British Academy, co-edits the Cambridge-based quarterly, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, and is a prominent member of the British-based Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, an international charity campaigning against homophobia.

He was knighted in 2012 for services to scholarship and holds awards for several books. He was the 2010 recipient of the Cundill Prize in History from Montreal's McGill University for his 2009 "A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years," which was accompanied by a BBC television series.

In his interview, MacCulloch said his research suggested the church's handling of abuse had been "fairly

consistent" for the past four centuries, making it incorrect to claim it was "a product of the permissive society of the 1960s."

"No other Christian church in history has imposed universal celibacy on its clergy -- on the contrary, Orthodox churches made their parish clergy marry and have families, while Protestants also encouraged this at the Reformation," said the historian, an Anglican deacon, whose latest study, "Silence in Christian History," will be published by Penguin this fall.

"The historical record shows sexual abuse isn't just about sex, but also about power. Those frustrated by celibacy will find another outlet for their emotions -- this seems to be a consistent structural pattern," he said.

A spokesman for the Catholic Communication Network of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales said Wednesday no one in the church would be available to respond to MacCulloch's remarks.

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