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Does Catholic celibacy contribute to child sex abuse?

With the Roman Catholic Church facing a series of paedophilia scandals, some observers have begun to ask whether the tradition of celibacy in the priesthood has contributed to child abuse. The BBC's Paul Henley raises the question with Catholics in Cologne.



Protesters in the southern German city of Freiburg, 22 February 2010

Child sex abuse allegations have caused anger in Germany

In Pope Benedict XVI's home country, Germany, the Catholic Church could have hoped for a better Easter in terms of public relations.

While the media deal, nearly daily, with fresh allegations of priests sexually abusing children, opinion polls published by Stern magazine suggest almost a fifth of German Catholics have considered leaving the Church because of the abuse scandal and only 17% of Germans now trust the Church as an institution.

Typical of the kind of comment Catholic leaders would have preferred not to have faced, was a contribution to a recent ZDF television discussion programme by Professor Klaus Beier, head of the Institute of Sexology and Sexual Medicine at Berlin's Charite Hospital.

"If you are already struggling with a conflicted sexuality, including paedophile tendencies, then it is attractive to become part of an institution that obliges you to be celibate," he said.

"I have seen many of these cases... and it is something the Catholic Church should be made aware of."

'Abnormal sexuality'

More surprising has been the contribution to the debate of senior figures from inside the Church, including Hamburg Auxiliary Bishop Hans-Jochen Jaschke, who seemed to add fuel to the fire of those making a connection between priestly celibacy and paedophilia.

He was quoted as saying that the "celibate lifestyle can attract people who have an abnormal sexuality and cannot integrate sexuality into their lives."

But even those outspoken Catholic rebels who have long called for a discussion about the future of celibacy - including Father Hans Kung, a contemporary of the Pope and well-known thorn in the side of the Vatican - have distanced themselves from any attempt to link paedophile offences and priestly vows of chastity.

Now another theologian, Manfred Luetz, psychiatrist, author and organiser of a 2003 Vatican congress about the abuse of children, has been defending the Church's stance, resisting any link between celibacy and paedophilia.

"I do not think that the Vatican is trying to prevent any debate about celibacy," he said, speaking in his office at Cologne's Alexianer Hospital, where he is director.

"Catholics are free to talk about it. Celibacy is no dogma. But I think when we have a discussion about abuse, then this is not the moment to discuss celibacy, because then we make the same strategies as the offenders do.

"The offenders always say 'we are not the guilty ones; society is guilty, the church is guilty, celibacy is the problem, not us'. And I do not want to be an accomplice to such escape strategies".

Modernisation?

Dr Luetz dismisses any suggestion of a scientific correlation between celibacy and abuse.

"The father of a family", he says, "is 36 times more likely to abuse than a celibate priest. So it is not good to discuss celibacy in this context.

"Instead, we have to discuss how to prevent other abuses, we have to speak about the victims and we have to speak about the way we approach these topics with transparency."

Dr Luetz says the Church has already been doing this for six years, noting that guidelines are now in place and praising a campaign in Germany for victims to come forward.

But he also notes that most of the cases now emerging date back to long before these measures were put in place.

"I know many think that reforming celibacy rules would be a modernisation, but what is modernising?" he asks.

"The Protestant Church doesn't have celibacy and the number of people leaving their clergy is higher than ours."

Worldly experience

Many German Catholics visiting Cologne's famous cathedral during Easter week do appear, however, to fix on priestly celibacy as one of the issues contributing to the church's current problems.

One woman in her 20s suggested marriage for priests would be a healthy step forward for the institution.

"If it would be allowed I think there wouldn't be so many problems and so many secrets that they have to keep," she said.

Another church-goer said she thought more worldly experience had to be a good thing among priests.

"The family and children - they should experience what they are talking about," she said.

A man visiting the cathedral with his wife and daughters agreed.

"It should be possible for priests to marry," he said.

"It would be a good face for the church, so people can see they make a first step to be more modern and to be actual."

Damian Sassin, who served as a Jesuit priest for 10 years before leaving the priesthood and getting married, is also among those who supports reform.

"The celibacy rule is a part of the current crisis of the Church. It's definitely not the only one but it plays a role in it," he said.

"It took me a while for me to... finally admit that I just couldn't live this [way]"> happily and healthily, knowing quite a few priests who obviously couldn't do that either, but kept doing it, and became more and more strange people."

Interview: Former Jesuit priest says he left the priesthood because of celibacy rules

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