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Cover photo: Incense is burned during worship in the church of a Swiss monastery. Photo: Keystone

Priests: from protectors to abusers



It is horrifying and shameful: hundreds of children and young people, if not more, have suffered sexual abuse from Catholic priests in Switzerland. Sexual assault is inexcusable no matter who does it. However, when perpetrated by those who – in the eyes of children – stand for goodness and safety as the upholders of faith and moral standards, it is even more monstrous. Both for the victims and for the church itself. The Roman Catholic Church in Switzerland being an extreme case in point. It was the church itself that initiated the exploration of its murky past, but that has in no way tempered the torrent of fury being unleashed against it. People are leaving the church in droves. And many secular trustees of church life in Switzerland – the parishes with their democratically elected committees – are asking searching questions of the Catholic clergy. We consider what this shocking state of affairs means for the church in our Focus article – and quote an expert: The Catholic Church is in its worst crisis since the Reformation.

Is this catastrophe also relevant to non-Catholics? Most definitely: the decline of religion in Switzerland has been becoming increasingly apparent for decades. Our society is based on Western Christian values and readily invokes these; meanwhile, the country is becoming ever more secular. In 1970, almost 98 per cent of all people in Switzerland adhered to the Catholic, Protestant or Jewish faiths. In 2020, the figure was still over 60 per cent. Now, those who have no interest in the church or religion in the conventional sense already form the biggest “community of faith”. The files from the Catholic Church’s archives that are now seeing the light of day are accelerating this change.

Some things change more quickly than others. Look at how Switzerland elects its national government: it starts with animated debate as to whether the secret, unwritten law about the representation of the parties in the government – the so-called “magic formula” – should be adjusted. Then, everything stays the same. The “magic formula” could also be called a “static formula”. But that doesn’t make it bad: many Swiss approve of the reliably boring nature of politics in Switzerland. They think it’s preferable to the upheaval that comes with populist movements. On that note, Switzerland has elected a new government for the next four years – see page 18.

MARC LETTAU, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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