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Autor: Wenger, Susanne
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The church protected the perpetrators, not the victims

An academic study has for the first time established the facts relating to sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church in Switzerland over the past 70 years. The rank and file are up in arms. Church leaders have come under pressure, and the country's largest official church is in crisis.

Photo Keystone

SUSANNE WENGER

A research team from the University of Zurich led by historians Monika Dommann and Marietta Meier spent one year combing through church archives in all Switzerland's language regions. The researchers viewed tens of thousands of pages of previously confidential records and conducted many interviews. The conclusions of the pilot study published in September were devastating. Evidence was uncovered of a broad spectrum of cases of abuse ranging from problematic boundary violations to severe, systematic abuse over a period of years.

The study uncovered 1,002 cases of abuse, 510 accused and 921 abused persons dating from the mid-20th century onwards. Three-quarters of the victims were minors and slightly over half of them were male. The accused

were almost all men, mainly priests working as ministers or curates, such as vicars or chaplains, in parishes. According to the researchers, the most conducive situation to an attack was "social spaces with specific power constellations": pastoral work, serving as altar boys, religious instruction, youth associations, Catholic homes and boarding schools.

Transferred instead of suspended

Sexual abuse has never been the exclusive preserve of the Catholic Church and clergy are not generally speaking under suspicion. Nonetheless, the 136-page report reveals how irresponsibly the church handled the abuse. Canon law, which has long classed sexual abuse of minors as a serious criminal offence, was largely bypassed. Church officials instead

looked the other way, played down or covered up what was happening. There were many instances of priests who had been accused or found guilty simply being transferred (see box). This enabled the perpetrators to re-offend. The church prioritised its own interests over protecting its members, argue the researchers.

The research team consider the cases covered in the report as the tip of the iceberg, as there are still many records under lock and key, for example at the Apostolic Nunciature (the diplomatic representation of the Vatican in Switzerland). The study was commissioned in 2021 by Catholic Church bodies in Switzerland, including the Swiss Bishops' Conference and the Central Conference of the Roman Catholic Church, a type of umbrella association of cantonal churches under public law. The Swiss investigation

happened late by international standards, and its findings have shaken the church.

Preliminary investigation of bishops

Church expert Daniel Kosch argues in the “Neue Zürcher Zeitung” that the real scandal is how an institution with the role of a moral authority can be so dismissive of those who have suffered abuse while in its care. He called it the worst crisis in the Catholic Church in Switzerland since the Reformation. In response, the church has taken a harder line with sexual abuse since the turn of the millennium. In 2002, the Bishops’ Conference issued guidelines. In addition, all six dioceses must now have a prevention strategy and a specialist committee for the abused. Victims of



attacks falling under the statute of limitations are receiving payments from a compensation fund set up in 2016.

In its response to the study, the Bishops’ Conference recognised “the suffering of those who were abused and the culpability of the church”. The

The venerable Saint Maurice monastery (VS): several children and adolescents are said to have been sexually assaulted here.

Photo: Keystone

President of the Bishops’ Conference, Basel Bishop Felix Gmür, announced additional measures including contact points separate from the church. The Bishop of St. Gallen, Markus Büchel, apologised – he was tainted through a serious case of abuse in his diocese, described in the study, that continued until fairly recently. However, the public were not convinced. Instead, the high-ranking clerics found themselves under investigation, as reported by the media. The Pope ordered a canonical investigation in the summer into four acting members of the nine-person Bishops’ Conference, among others.

Bishop Joseph Bonnemain appointed head of investigation

The abbot of Saint Maurice monastery in Valais – a member of the Bishops’ Conference as head of a territorial abbey – is himself accused of having sexually molested a youth. He initially took leave of absence from his position. Three bishops are alleged not to have acted as they were supposed to in response to cases of abuse. While they admitted some errors, they also rejected other allegations. Rome appointed Joseph Bonnemain, bishop of Chur since 2021, to lead the preliminary investigation. He takes a firm line against abuse in his own diocese. Nonetheless, critics question whether he will really move

What the victims went through

Vreni Peterer, who is now 62, was sexually abused by a village priest in the canton of St. Gallen in the early 1970s when she was ten. To encourage others to come forward, she recently spoke out about her experiences after having kept quiet for decades. The priest had repeatedly touched girls inappropriately during religion classes. One day, he insisted on driving Peterer home. But instead of taking her home, he took Peterer to the edge of the forest and raped her. She was then told off by her mother for being late back from school. Looking back, Peterer says there is no way she would have said something at the time. Her abuser threatened that she would go to hell. In any case, the priest was beyond reproach as an authority figure. Peterer experienced recurring physical and psychological problems in adulthood, for which she required therapy. It wasn’t until 2018 that she was able to bring herself to contact the specialist committee established by the Diocese of St. Gallen in 2002 and report the priest. He had since died. Peterer learned from the records that this priest had history in another



parish. He had even received a suspended custodial sentence from a secular court for sexual misconduct with and in the presence of children. Despite that, he was still appointed as priest to Vreni Peterer’s parish. In other words, her suffering could have been avoided. Peterer now presides over an association for people who suffered abuse within the church. She did not leave the church. Peterer says she is not against the church, instead she opposes a church where there is abuse. (SWE)



Chur Bishop Joseph Bonnemain had to investigate alleged cover-ups involving fellow bishops. Rome appointed him to the task. Photo: Keystone

against fellow bishops on his own. As a result, Bonnemain was assigned an expert in criminal law and a cantonal judge to support the investigation.

The bishop of Chur intended to deliver his report by the end of 2023 (after this edition of “Swiss Review” goes to press). Depending on the outcome, the papal authority may initiate disciplinary measures or open proceedings under ecclesiastical criminal law. Meanwhile, among the rank and file the impression has grown that, despite assertions to the contrary, the bishops will not go far enough to resolve the problem. The Central Conference of the Roman Catholic Church issued a number of demands. These are designed, inter alia, to establish a sepa-

ration of powers in canon law. That would mean having a nationwide tribunal involving laypersons and church figures.

Unrest among the faithful

Catholic parishes all over the country felt the fallout from the report as people left in droves. This church exodus has admittedly been an issue for some time, however, and it affects both the Catholic and the Protestant churches, Switzerland’s largest and second largest faith groups, respectively. Thousands of people are leaving both churches every year. In the canton of Lucerne, a Catholic heartland, the cantonal church was so alarmed that it resorted to open rebellion. In September, 14 church councils decided to block payments of their church taxes to their Basel diocese (see interview).

In November, the synod, the parliament of the Lucerne Cantonal Catholic Church, came out in favour of the rebels. It paid an advance on the condition that the bishop of Basel, Felix Gmür, commit to a more effective approach to combat abuse. Otherwise,

Lucerne will withhold the second half of the annual payment to the bishopric in autumn 2024. A special committee of the Synod will evaluate the measures taken. “A thunderbolt has hit the Catholic Church,” commented information portal kath.ch.

“I report to the Pope.”

The bishop of Basel, seen as a source of hope, was alienated by the cantonal synod’s confrontational stance. Some of the demands had already been implemented, he argued; others had been raised in Rome by the Swiss bishops. There was a lot he could not do under his own authority: “I report to the Pope and no one else,” Gmür told the synod. Other cantonal churches, although in agreement with Lucerne’s position, refrained from imposing their own sanctions. There is widespread agreement that the abuse saga stems from deeper problems within the Catholic Church, with regard not only to its hierarchical structures, but also to its outlook and opinions.

The Central Conference of the Roman Catholic Church argues for “the abandonment of rigid and homophobic sexual morality” as well as “the unconditional acceptance of church staff living in partnerships”. The Zurich researchers also raise the question in their study as to whether “characteristics specific to Catholicism” may have facilitated the sexual abuse: sexual morality, celibacy, gender roles within the church, and its ambivalent stance regarding homosexuality. The academics will look at these – and other aspects – in greater depth. More in-depth research will ensue from the pilot study. The church has committed to that until 2026.

The study is available via the following link (in German): revue.link/kirche

The church pews – here in St. Gallen – have been slowly emptying for years. Many people are leaving the Roman Catholic Church.

Photo: Keystone

