

HANS KÜNG

Against celibacy

The Church in Germany and in Ireland is engulfed in a clerical sex-abuse scandal. The leader of the German Church maintains that abuse has nothing to do with clerical celibacy, homosexuality or church teaching. Here a leading Catholic theologian refutes these claims

Massive sexual abuse of children and adolescents by Catholic clergymen has been reported from the United States, from Ireland, and now from Germany: this represents an enormous loss of image for the Catholic Church and highlights the profound crisis in which the Church is caught.

Speaking for the German Bishops' Conference, its President, Archbishop Robert Zollitsch of Freiburg, has made an initial public statement. That Zollitsch has branded the abuse cases as "outrageous crimes" and that the bishops' conference as a whole, in its statement of 25 February, has asked pardon of all the victims, is a first step in coming to terms with this inexcusable misconduct, but further steps must follow. Moreover, Zollitsch's statement contains three grievous errors, which cannot pass without rebuttal.

His first erroneous assertion is that sexual abuse by clergymen has nothing to do with celibacy. Objection! It cannot be denied that such abuse can also be found in families, schools and in churches without a celibacy rule. But why is it so prevalent in the Catholic Church under celibate leadership? Naturally, celibacy is not the only cause of such misconduct. But it is the most important and structurally the most decisive expression of an uptight attitude of the Church's leadership towards sexuality in general, an attitude which is also revealed in the birth-control question and in other related issues.

A look at the New Testament makes it clear that Jesus and Paul practised celibacy in an exemplary way for the sake of their ministry, but they allowed full freedom in this matter to each individual. In terms of the Gospel, celibacy can only be affirmed as a freely chosen vocation (charisma) and not as a generally applicable law. Paul emphatically contradicted those who in his own day took the position that "it is well for a man not to touch a woman", replying, "But because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband" (1 Corinthians 7:1-2). According to the First Letter to Timothy, "a bishop must be above reproach, married only once" (1 Timothy 3:2): it does not say "not married".

Peter and the other apostles were married men and their ministries did not suffer. For many centuries, this remained the matter-of-course rule for bishops and priests, and in

the Churches of the East, both the Orthodox and those united with Rome, it continues to be the rule, at least for priests, up to the present day. The Roman celibacy law contradicts the Gospel and the venerable Catholic tradition. It should be abolished.

His second erroneous assertion is that it is "completely wrong" to trace the abuse cases to a systemic fault in the Catholic Church. Objection – the celibacy rule practically did not exist during the first millennium of the Church. It was introduced in the West in the eleventh century by monks (who freely chose celibacy), in particular by Pope Gregory VII, and against the vigorous opposition of the clergy in Italy and even more in Germany, where only three bishops dared to promulgate the Roman decree. Thousands of priests protested against the new law. In a petition, the German clergy objected with the words: "Does the Pope not recognise the word of the Lord: 'Let anyone accept this who can' (Matthew 19:12)?" In this statement – the only

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one in the gospels on celibacy – Jesus clearly speaks out in favour of a free choice.

The celibacy rule – together with papal absolutism and constrained clericalism – became one of the central pillars of the "Roman system". In contrast to the Eastern Churches, the celibate clergy in the West, in particular because of their celibacy, came to be completely and utterly set apart from the rest of the Christian people, a unique, dominant social class, superior to the class of the laity but thoroughly subordinated to the Roman Pope.

Compulsory celibacy is the principal reason for today's catastrophic shortage of priests, for the fatal neglect of eucharistic celebration, and for the tragic breakdown of personal pastoral ministry in many places. These consequences are papered over by the fusion of local parishes into regional "pastoral units", whose pastors are completely overburdened. What would be the best solution to the problem of recruiting future priests? Quite simply:

abolition of the celibacy rule, the root of all these evils, and the admission of women to ordination. The bishops know this, but they do not have the courage to say it in public.

His third erroneous assertion is that the bishops have accepted enough responsibility. Of course, it is good to hear that wholehearted measures are now being taken to bring cases of abuse to light and to prevent them in the future. Nevertheless, one must ask, do not the bishops themselves bear responsibility for the decades-long practice of covering up cases of abuse, often taking no more serious measures than secretly relocating the perpetrator? Have the cover-up specialists of the past suddenly become credible uncoverers? Must not independent commissions be established to deal with such cases?

Hardly any bishop has until now admitted his own share of the blame. Indeed, the bishops could well argue that, in keeping things under wraps, they were only following instructions from Rome. On grounds of discretion, the secretive Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has in the past claimed exclusive jurisdiction for all significant cases of sexual offences by clerics, and thus, in the years 1981-2005, all of these cases landed on the desk of its Prefect, Cardinal Ratzinger. As recently as 18 May 2001, Cardinal Ratzinger sent to all the bishops around the world a solemn epistle concerning serious crimes (*Epistula de delictis gravioribus*), in which cases of abuse were put under "papal secrecy" (*secretum pontificium*), the violation of which entails severe ecclesiastical penalties.

Does the Church not have a right to a "mea culpa" from the Pope as well, in collegiality with the bishops? And should such an act of repentance not be linked to an act of reparation, allowing, at last, that the celibacy rule, which was not permitted to be discussed at the Second Vatican Council, should be openly and freely submitted to the judgement of the whole Church? With the same openness with which the Church is at last coming to terms with the abuse cases, it is now time to deal with one of their essential structural causes, the celibacy rule. Courageously and emphatically, the bishops should propose this to Pope Benedict XVI.

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