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World: Europe

Austrian bishops label cardinal a paedophile



Disgraced former Austrian church leader Gröer, (L), with successor Christoph Schoenborn

The Catholic church in Austria has released a statement which says the paedophile accusations levelled at the Archbishop of Vienna, Hans Hermann Groer, are "in essence true."

The statement was issued by the country's top four bishops.

Hans Hermann Gröer was Cardinal and Archbishop of Vienna until in 1995. He was forced to resign after accusations that he molested a pupil in a shower at a Catholic boys school 22 years ago.

Except for a written statement to a newspaper that year when he rejected the charges as "defamation", he made no further comment and the Vatican made no move at the time to investigate.

New charges against him were made in December by a monk who said the former archbishop had molested him as a child.

He subsequently stepped down as the prior of Austria's Goettweig Abbey, and the Vatican announced further steps, including sending inspectors to the abbey for an investigation.

Damage to church

The statement on Friday from the four bishops was made to minimise the damage to the church.

"We feel morally obliged to make this statement, particularly because continued silence would really harm the church's pastoral mission through a paralysing

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general suspicion that the reputation of a cardinal is more important to the church than the wellbeing of young people," the four bishops said.

The statement came after months of building resentment among predominantly Catholic Austrians over what was seen as a Church cover-up.

In Rome for the installation of his successor Christoph Schoenborn as cardinal, ex-Archbishop Gröer met Pope John Paul II on February 20, but no announcement was made by the Vatican afterwards.

But Cardinal Schoenborn is one of the signatories of the statement.

Troubled times

Before the latest accusations against ex-Archbishop Gröer were made, a letter by retiring Bishop Reinhold Stecher called the Vatican rigid and outdated.

It decried the Pope's support of priestly celibacy and the ban on women priests.

In 1995, a group was formed to urge the Church to talk about its problems.

It later developed a petition demanding the Church loosen up its conservative position on women, homosexuality and celibacy.

Nearly 500,000 active Catholics signed it.

Most Austrians are registered Catholics, but only about 25% - 1.2m - attend Mass regularly. The Pope is due to visit Austria in June.

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