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Obituaries

Hans Groer, 83; Austrian Cardinal in Sex Scandal

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Retired Austrian Cardinal Hans Hermann Groer, forced by the Vatican to relinquish his church duties in 1998 amid allegations that he had sexually molested young boys, has died. He was 83.

Groer died of pneumonia Sunday night at a hospital in St. Poelten, about 40 miles west of Vienna, where he was being treated for cancer, said the cardinal's former secretary, Michael Dinhobel. The famed Pummerin bell in Vienna's St. Stephen's Cathedral tolled Monday to mark Groer's death.

Pope John Paul II sent a telegram of condolence, saying the cardinal had led the Archdiocese of Vienna "with great love for Christ and his church."

Groer's successor, Cardinal Christoph Schoenborn, sought to steer attention away from Groer's scandalous past.

"In view of death, the painful questions of the past may be put in God's hands. That applies to Cardinal Groer as well as to any other Christian," said Schoenborn, among several top Austrian clerics who visited Groer in the days before his death.

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Groer was cardinal of Vienna from 1986 to 1995, when allegations first surfaced that he had molested students at an all-male Catholic high school in the early 1970s.

Under pressure from church and lay groups, Groer resigned later that year as head of the Austrian Bishops' Conference. In 1998, Pope John Paul II ordered him to relinquish all church duties, and Groer went into months of Vatican-imposed exile near Dresden, Germany.

Groer never admitted any guilt, but the scandal was the worst since World War II to rock the Roman Catholic Church in Austria. The Vatican drew sharp criticism from many Austrians for taking three years to act.

Eight in 10 of the country's 8 million people identify themselves as Catholics, but thousands have left the church every year, citing the Groer affair, the growing worldwide priest-pedophilia scandal and other issues, such as the Vatican's refusal to sanction birth control and the ordination of women.

Born in Vienna on Oct. 13, 1919, Groer moved with his parents to Czechoslovakia in 1929 and lived there for a decade, attending Austrian schools. He studied for the priesthood at the Hollabrunn seminary, and was ordained in 1942.

Before the allegations of pedophilia surfaced, Groer had been well-liked by older churchgoers and some younger conservatives, and had sought to reach out to more liberal Catholics.

The scandal began in March 1998 when a newsmagazine reported charges by a former seminary student that Groer, his religion instructor, had abused him repeatedly in the early 1970s.

Other former students at the all-male school in Hollabrunn, 40 miles north of Vienna, came forward with similar charges. State prosecutors never became involved because the statute of limitations for sexual abuse of a minor had long since expired when the matter came to light. Groer had applied for retirement in 1994, when he turned 75, but John Paul left him in his post.

A funeral Mass is scheduled April 4 at St. Stephen's Cathedral, the Archdiocese of Vienna said.

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