

EUROPE

Future Pope's Role in Abuse Case Was Complex

By KATRIN BENNHOLD APRIL 26, 2010

VIENNA — As Pope Benedict XVI has come under scrutiny for his handling of sexual abuse cases, both his supporters and his critics have paid fresh attention to the way he responded to a sexual abuse scandal in Austria in the 1990s, one of the most damaging to confront the church in Europe.

Defenders of Benedict cite his role in dealing with Cardinal Hans Hermann Groër of Vienna as evidence that he moved assertively, if quietly, against abusers. They point to the fact that Cardinal Groër left office six months after accusations against him of molesting boys first appeared in the Austrian news media in 1995. The future pope, they say, favored a full canonical investigation, only to be blocked by other ranking officials in the Vatican.

A detailed look at the rise and fall of the clergyman, who died in 2003, and the involvement of Benedict, a Bavarian theologian with many connections to German-speaking Austria, paints a more complex picture.

Benedict, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, had the ear of Pope John Paul II and was able to block a favored candidate for archbishop of Vienna, clearing the way for Father Groër to assume the post in 1986, say senior church officials and priests with knowledge of the process. His critics question how this influence failed him nine years later in seeking a fuller investigation into the case.

Benedict's ambiguous role has made the Groër case a kind of Rorschach test of

the future pope's treatment of sexual abuse during his long stewardship of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican's powerful doctrinal body.

There are indications that Benedict had a lower tolerance for sexual misconduct by elite clergy members than other top Vatican officials.

Unlike John Paul, his predecessor, Benedict has as pope apologized and met with sexual abuse victims. But while he often, as a cardinal, used his clout to enforce doctrine and sideline clergy members whose views diverged from his own, he seemed less willing at that time to aggressively pursue sexual abusers.

Msgr. Helmut Schüller, a former vicar general of the Vienna Archdiocese, says the church cannot win back the trust of Catholics unless the pope is more forthcoming about his past role in managing abuse scandals.

"He cannot expect others to be transparent, like the Irish bishops he appeals to in his letter, and not be transparent himself," said Monsignor Schüller, who until 2005 was the archdiocese's ombudsman for sexual abuse cases.

The Groër case occurred before the most recent public uproar over sexual abuse in the American church, and also before Cardinal Ratzinger was formally given the task of supervising the Vatican's response to such scandals in 2001.

But it was also not an ordinary case of abuse. It involved a clergyman, Cardinal Groër, with influential friends in the Roman Curia, the church's administrative body, and a reported bond with John Paul over their shared devotion to the Virgin Mary. The results of a Vatican investigation at Cardinal Groër's abbey in 1998 have never been released by the Vatican.

Four Austrian bishops, including his successor in Vienna, Archbishop Christoph Schönborn, now a cardinal, have deemed the accusations against Cardinal Groër accurate with "moral certainty." Some of his young victims, whose estimated number ranges from half a dozen to 30, later recounted how he would ask them to come to his room for confession, demand they take off their clothes and then abuse them.

Thousands of Austrian Catholics left the church as a result of the Groër scandal and many more joined grass-roots movements challenging Rome's centralized

control and conservatism.

For the rest of his life, until his death seven years ago, Cardinal Groër never confessed or faced trial. His punishment was to withdraw from public life and, with the exception of a brief but contentious period at a German convent, live in another convent that he had founded years earlier.

The future Cardinal Groër, a Benedictine monk who organized high-profile monthly pilgrimages to a shrine in rural eastern Austria where he said he once had an apparition of the Virgin Mary, was a surprise choice when he was named archbishop on July 15, 1986, priests and senior church officials say.

A Favorite Is Blocked

The favorite on the final short list was a conservative clergyman, the Rev. Kurt Krenn, who had close ties to some of John Paul's closest confidants, two senior officials with knowledge of the process said.

"The energetic protest of Cardinal Ratzinger was decisive in removing Kurt Krenn from the list," said one of the officials, who worked at the Vienna Archdiocese at the time and who declined to be identified because the procedure is confidential.

Benedict, known for his rigorous theology, objected that his Austrian colleague, Father Krenn, did not have a Ph.D. in theology, but rather in philosophy, say officials and priests in Vienna who knew both men.

Father Krenn, who became a bishop in 1987, also had a reputation for being a loose cannon. In 2004, he had to retire early after dismissing the discovery at his seminary of a large cache of child pornography and images of young priests having sex as "boyish pranks."

Bishop Krenn, said to be in poor health, was unavailable for an interview.

The Rev. Rudolf Schermann, at the time in charge of two parishes and now the publisher of the weekly magazine Kirche-In

, said Benedict's veto effectively propelled Cardinal Groër into the archdiocese.

In the words of Cardinal Schönborn, who first met Cardinal Ratzinger in 1972 when he was the future pope's student and has been close to him ever since, Benedict "was the second most important man in the Vatican and had without doubt the ear of the pope."

But blocking Bishop Krenn does not appear to have been accompanied by a thorough vetting of Cardinal Groër, who was already under suspicion within his own abbey of sexually abusing minors and young men.

The Rev. Udo Fischer, a priest who attended the Hollabrunn boys' seminary in eastern Austria in the 1960s and early 1970s, where Cardinal Groër had lived and taught for decades, said that in 1985 he personally warned the abbot of their local Benedictine monastery about Cardinal Groër's inappropriate behavior with boys, whom he often referred to as "little angels."

Accusations Unreported

Father Fischer told Abbot Clemens Lashofer of Göttweig Abbey that he himself had been molested by Cardinal Groër when they worked together on a youth movement devoted to the Virgin Mary in the early 1970s, and that he had observed him acting inappropriately with others who were not willing to come forward.

When Father Fischer learned about Cardinal Groër's appointment as archbishop, he said he sent an angry telegram to Abbot Lashofer and asked why he had not spoken up. The abbot, who was head of Austria's Benedictine order at the time, claimed he had never been questioned by the Vatican's representative, the nuncio.

"If they really did not ask him, they did not want to know," Father Fischer said. Abbot Lashofer died last year.

Priests and church law experts say that the process of due diligence the Vatican performs on candidates for bishop is usually rigorous.

Members of the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops, whose ranks included Cardinal Ratzinger at the time, tend to review detailed files about the candidates before deciding which ones to recommend to the pope.

“It is a very complicated procedure,” said Lorenz Wolf, judicial vicar of the archdiocese in Munich. “It is very improbable that someone could hide something.”

The rumors surrounding Cardinal Groër's transgressions went beyond the circle of those who suffered at his hands. Josef Votzi, the journalist who broke the scandal in 1995 in the magazine *Profil*, is another Hollabrunn alumnus and said that even among staff members of the Vienna Archdiocese he interviewed when Father Groër was named archbishop, his history was “an open secret.”

In 1995, a victim came forward, telling *Profil* that the archbishop, then his religion teacher and confessor, had sexually abused him for four years two decades earlier at Hollabrunn.

In Rome a few weeks later, Cardinal Schönborn said, Cardinal Ratzinger told him behind closed doors that he wanted to set up a fact-finding commission to establish clarity. “That for me is one of the best indications that I know from personal experience that today's pope had a very decisive, clear way of handling abuse cases,” he said.

In a subsequent conversation later that year, Benedict “explicitly regretted that the commission had not been set up,” Cardinal Schönborn said. “It became clear very quickly that the current that prevailed in Rome was not the one demanding clarity here. Cardinal Ratzinger told me that the other side, the diplomatic side, had prevailed.”

Where John Paul II stood himself remains unclear, church officials in Vienna with knowledge of the case said. The “diplomatic side,” they said, was led by the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, and Archbishop Stanislaw Dziwisz, the personal secretary of John Paul II.

Cardinal Schönborn said he could not explain why Cardinal Ratzinger had so much influence with the pope on other matters, but lacked the clout to have Cardinal Groër investigated for abuse. “I am not responsible to explain everything,” he said. “I just know that that is how it was.”

Nor did Benedict's subsequent communications on the matter shed much light

on the scandal. In letters he sent to Austrian clergy members after the scandal, he made no mention of the former archbishop's transgressions, instead warning bishops against ceding ground on the reformist proposals of the Catholic grass-roots movements that had sprung up.

In 1996, Cardinal Groër was named head of a priory in Germany then overseen by Göttweig Abbey and still appeared at official church functions. This sparked a vocal rebellion in Göttweig in late 1997, among some of his former students and victims, who called for his resignation.

Faced with such upheaval, church officials removed Cardinal Groër from the priory and sent him back in January to the convent where he had lived after he was forced out in 1995. Shortly afterward, John Paul II approved a Vatican investigation.

'Serious Punishment'

Abbot Franziskus Heereman, who helped conduct the inquiry, or visitation, says that Cardinal Ratzinger was the driving force inside the Vatican behind the investigation.

After the one-week visitation ended in March, Cardinal Groër was removed from the priory (for "health reasons"), told to stay out of public view and sent to a convent in eastern Germany for six months. "Imposing on a cardinal to stay out of the public view and forbidding him to take part in official ceremonies is a very serious punishment," Cardinal Schönborn said.

But no result of the investigation was ever made public, and Cardinal Groër never faced a church court or even a public rebuke from Rome, let alone a secular trial.

Many in the Austrian clergy criticized what they saw as an attempt by Rome to protect a cardinal while ignoring victims demanding justice. Prior Gottfried Schätz, the No. 2 at Göttweig Abbey who had helped lead the outcry against Cardinal Groër, left in September 1998 and requested removal from the priesthood, which he was granted unusually quickly, within a year, Father Fischer said.

Father Schermann said, "They did as much as they had at each point in time

given the public outcry, and no more.”

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