

Abused, Ignored, Slandered: Victims of Church-related Violence

For the first time ever, an in-depth report illuminates a taboo subject involving the Roman Catholic Church

(Vienna, November 18, 2010) A hotline unconnected with the Catholic Church has been available to victims of Church-related violence since March 2010. Callers receive initial counseling from clinical psychologists and legal assistance from lawyers.

The hotline's report is the first of its kind and reveals a wealth of facts concerning this dark side of the Church. The extent of abuse has been documented extensively for the first time in Austria and is now being published.

1. SUMMARY

In the first ten days of operation alone, 150 individuals contacted the hotline, and the total has reached 325, 91 women (28%) and 234 men (72%).

- **When the abuse took place:** While the majority of cases (59,7%) took place in the 1960s and '70s, 18 individuals have been abused within the last 20 years alone.
- **States:** Broken down by state, the majority of reports (73) involved Upper Austria, followed by Vienna (72) and Lower Austria (68).
- **Duration of the abuse:** For 43.3%, the period of time was between two and five years. Of the women, 17.6% reported time periods of eight years or longer, and nine percent of the males were abused over the same amount of time.
- **Age of the victims:** Twelve percent of the callers were six years of age or younger when the abuse began. The majority of incidents (79,5%) took place when they were between seven and 14 years old, a period of time during which they first came into contact with parish priests.
- **Location:** Boarding schools or homes, where children were particularly vulnerable, represent 55.8% of the locations. In many cases, members of socially underprivileged groups were involved. In cases where children confided in their parents, they were normally beaten, either by their parents or members of the Church, and this treatment silenced them.
- **Tip of the iceberg:** Sixty percent of the callers claimed to know of other children who were subjected to psychological, physical or sexual abuse from the same perpetrator.
- **Victims' interests:** While solely 4,1% of victims are interested in obtaining psychotherapy, the majority expressed a desire to combat decades of silence and coverups (54.1%) and obtain information relating to legal action or compensation (41.7%).

- **The accused:** The victims named 422 perpetrators of both genders. Of those, 63% were ordained priests (this figure includes both diocesan priests and members of orders). Of the perpetrators named, 20.8% were non-ordained members of an order. These statistics make it clear that the abuse of children within the Catholic Church represents a significant problem.
- **Age and gender of the accused:** 43,3% of the perpetrators were between 30 and 39 years of age. The majority, 78.2%, were male.
- **Strategies of the abusers:** Of the perpetrators, 40.4% demanded that their victims not tell anyone what had happened. One-fourth threatened damnation and Hell or violence, or claimed that they would be committing a sin if they talked about the abuse. Privileges were often provided.
- **Structural causes:**
 - o Obviously, the Catholic Church's positions concerning sexuality – and to a certain extent compulsory celibacy also – increase the amount of danger to which children are exposed significantly, as the number of reports involving Evangelical churches amounted to less than one percent. This figure is far below the statistic for Austrians who belong to one of these churches (five percent).
 - o It could be said that perpetrators had job security within the Catholic Church: After being accused of abuse, priests were merely transferred. Even those who were convicted in a court of law were put back into positions as pastoral caregivers after serving their sentence, as a result of which they came into contact with new victims. In one example, two priests from other European countries who were convicted of sexually abusing children in their home countries spent decades working in Austrian parishes and boarding schools, where they committed the same crimes again.
- **Insufficient steps to deal with the problem:** The steps taken so far to deal with this scandal are wholly unsatisfactory. There is no political consciousness of the fact that a comprehensive independent investigation is needed. The "Klasnic Commission" is a board of inquiry made up of the groups under accusation.

2. DETAILS

Various forms of abuse

As shown in Table 2, 59.1% of the 325 victims reported sexual abuse, 57.2% were subjected to physical violence, and 32% experienced psychological abuse.

Table 2: frequency of various types of abuse

	Total	Percent (n=325)
Sexual abuse	192	59.1
Physical abuse	186	57.2
Psychological abuse	104	32.0
	482	

When the abuse started

59,7% of the reports involved abuse that took place in the 1960s and '70s. Forty-four reports involved the 1950s, which occupies third place, followed by 26 reports dealing with the 1980s. There are 15 reports of church-related violence experienced in the 1940s or earlier. A total of 18 victims told of abuse that happened within the past 20 years. The victims were not taken seriously at the time: Children who had the courage to talk to their parents, for example, and tell them that a local priest touched their genitals were in most cases silenced immediately and warned never to say such things about the priest again.

States

The highest number of incidents occurred in Upper Austria, which was named in 73 reports. Vienna was close behind, with 72 reports, and there were 68 involving Lower Austria. The lowest number, four, occurred in the Burgenland. We received between ten and 30 reports (specific information can be found in Table 1) involving the other states (Tyrol, Styria, Salzburg, Carinthia and Vorarlberg).

Table 1: reports according to state

	Women	Percent (n=91)	Men	Percent (n=234)	Total	Percent (n=325)
Upper Austria	8	8.8	65	27.8	73	22.5
Vienna	27	29.7	45	19.2	72	22.2
Lower Austria	22	24.2	46	19.7	68	20.9
Tyrol	9	9.9	21	9.0	30	9.2
Styria	7	7.7	17	7.3	24	7.4
Salzburg	7	7.7	11	4.7	18	5.5
Carinthia	1	1.1	10	4.3	11	3.4
Vorarlberg	1	1.1	9	3.8	10	3.1
Burgenland	1	1.1	3	1.3	4	1.2
Not specified	8	8.8	7	3.0	15	4.6
	91		234		325	

Duration of the abuse

A total of 17.3% of all victims claimed that the abuse lasted for a period of one year or less. For 43.3%, the period of time was between two and five years, and the duration was longer in 16.7% of cases.

Table 4: duration of the abuse

Duration	Women	Percent (n=91)	Men	Percent (n=234)	Total	Percent (n=325)
< 1 year	2	2.2	5	2.1	7	2.2
1 year	11	12.1	38	16.2	49	15.1
2 years	11	12.1	32	13.7	43	13.2
3 years	5	5.5	25	10.7	30	9.2
4 years	13	14.3	39	16.7	52	16
5 years	3	3.3	13	5.6	16	4.9
6 years	3	3.3	9	3.8	12	3.7
7 years	0	0	5	2.1	5	1.5
8 years	3	3.3	11	4.7	14	4.3
9 years	4	4.4	3	1.3	7	2.2
10 years	4	4.4	4	1.7	8	2.5
>10 years	5	5.5	3	1.3	8	2.5
Not specified	27	29.7	47	20.1	74	22.8
Total	91		234		325	

Age of victims when abuse started

Analysis of the data on the victim's age when the abuse began shows that 16 of the callers (4.9%) were under six years of age at the time. Twenty-three reported that abuse started when they were six, the age they began attending school, or older. After that, the figures rise relatively steadily (except for age nine) to the age of ten. A total of 16.3% of all victims indicated that the first incidence of abuse occurred when they were ten years of age, the point in time when the most episodes of abuse began. Thirty-three victims maintained that the abuse started when they were 11, 37 reported age 12, 22 named age 13 and 14 specified age 14. Age 15 or over was rarely indicated.

In Austria, students generally switch to a secondary school, often a boarding school, at age ten. Some of the victims described new students as being "fair game" for the rest of the school, and older pupils were often permitted to participate in the abuse, particularly when it was physical.

Age at the start of abuse, broken down by gender

A comparison of boys' and girls' ages when the abuse started shows that most girls were between the ages of six and eight when first abused, and boys tended to be between ten and 12.

This data indicates that girls between the ages of six and eight and boys between ten and 12 years of age are the most in need of protection.

How much time has passed since the abuse began?

For nearly 80% of all victims, more than 30 years passed until they found an opportunity to report their experiences to an independent office or organization.

Setting of the abuse

Most of the incidents (55.8%) involving representatives or employees of the Church reportedly took place in boarding schools and homes. The situation there often seems hopeless for children from poor or underprivileged families in particular.

Their parents were not willing to listen to them, and some of the victims, after suggesting that abuse was taking place, were told that he or she should be grateful to be receiving an education.

Victims' interests

The majority expressed a desire to combat decades of silence and coverups (54.1%). 41,7% of the victims were interested in legal questions (claims for compensation, legal action against the Church, general legal support). Solely 4,1% of the victims expressed a desire for psychotherapy. A portion of the victims had already obtained help in the form of psychotherapy, while others learned to come to terms with their experiences, more or less successfully, without this form of help and support.

The sole opportunity for learning whether similar reports have been made concerning the same institution was offered by the Independent Hotline for Victims of Church-related Violence (Unabhängige Hotline für Betroffene kirchlicher Gewalt). Furthermore, an opportunity to network was offered if there was mutual interest.

The accused

In all, the victims reported 422 male and female abusers. A total of 63% of the abusers reported were ordained priests, either diocesan priests or members of orders. Just over one-fifth (20.8%) of the perpetrators were non-ordained members of an order, and 2.4% were lay religion instructors. Lay employees of the Catholic Church amounted to 13.8% of the total number of abusers named¹ (see Table 20).

Table 20: functions of abusers, totals

Total	Ordained	Percent (n=419)	Non-ordained	Percent (n=419)
Priests	111	26.5		
Order members	129	30.8	87	20.8
Priests & religion instructors	16	3.8		
Order members & religion instructors	8	1.9		
Religion instructors			10	2.4
Lay workers			58	13.8
	264	63.0	155	37.0

This figures show clearly that the Catholic Church has a particularly significant problem with its employees who are well educated in theology, specifically their involvement in violence done to children. **Ordained priests seem to represent the greatest potential danger.**

According to the reports, the number of abusers who were ordained priests comprises solely 42% for female victims. In contrast, the number of non-ordained members of orders totals 51%. This can be explained by the significant share of nuns who abused girls in homes and boarding schools. The number of lay religion instructors and lay workers is relatively low, 0% and 7.9% respectively (see Table 21).

¹ Three of the abusers did not belong to any of these categories.

Table 21: function of female victims' abusers

Women	Ordained	Percent (n=101)	Non-ordained	Percent (n=101)
Priests	34	33.7		
Order members	4	4.0	51	50.5
Priests & religion instructors	2	2.0		
Order members & religion instructors	2	2.0		
Religion instructors			0	0.0
Lay workers			8	7.9
	42	41.6	59	58.4

In the case of male victims, ordained priests were accused of over two-thirds of the incidences of abuse reported.

Table 22: function of male victims' abusers

Men	Ordained	Percent (n=318)	Non-ordained	Percent (n=318)
Priests	77	24.2		
Order members	125	39.3	36	11.3
Priests & religion instructors	14	4.4		
Order members & religion instructors	6	1.9		
Religion instructors			10	3.1
Lay workers			50	15.7
	222	69.8	96	30.2

Age of the accused when the abuse started

The victims who were able to provide information about the perpetrator's age indicated the range of 30 to 39 years most often (43,3%). Considering the age of the accused when the abuse started and the fact that most of them were educated for a relatively long period of time (university study of theology), we can assume that the first 15 years on the job involve a significantly higher probability of them becoming an abuser.

Strategies employed by perpetrators

When the victims provided concrete information concerning strategies employed by perpetrators, demands to maintain silence about the abuse were named most often (40.4%). One-fourth of the specified strategies involved a specific religious background, such as threats of damnation and Hell or that the abused children would be committing a sin if they talked to anyone about what the abuse. There were also threats of violence and privileges were provided as enticements.

Which orders were named most often?

The Benedictines, who operate boarding schools in such places as Kremsmünster, Upper Austria; Seitenstetten, Lower Austria; and Fiecht, Tyrol, were named most often by far. The Christian Brothers, who have several schools and boarding schools in Vienna, most importantly Strebersdorf, and the Stephaneum school in Bad Goisern, Upper Austria, occupied second place, with 22 reports.

Just under ten percent of the reports involved the Cistercians, and a large portion of the victims visited the Stift Wilhering boarding school in Upper Austria. The Mehrerau monastery in Vorarlberg was also mentioned, in addition to others.

Seven percent of the victims mentioned the Franciscans and the Sisters of Charity (Barmherzige Schwestern vom Heiligen Vinzenz von Paul) each.

Table 23: frequency with which certain orders were named

	Number	Percent
Benedictines	48	25.7
Christian Brothers	22	11.8
Cistercians	19	10.2
Sisters of Charity	14	7.5
Franciscans/Capuchins	14	7.5
Oblates of St. Francis de Sales	8	4.3
Dominicans	5	2.7
Marianists	5	2.7
Pallottines	5	2.7
Sisters of Loreto	4	2.1
Missionaries of the Sacred Heart	4	2.1
Congregation of the Sisters of the Poor Child Jesus	4	2.1
Premonstratensians	4	2.1
Good Shepherd Sisters	3	1.6
Daughters of Divine Charity	3	1.6
Society of Saint Pius X	3	1.6
Canons regular	2	1.1
Salesians of Don Bosco	2	1.1
Franciscan Sisters	2	1.1
Jesuits	2	1.1
Carmelites	2	1.1
Kreuzschwestern	2	1.1
School Sisters of Notre Dame	1	0.5
Augustinians	1	0.5
Augustiner Chorfrauen	1	0.5
Benedictine Sisters	1	0.5
Minorites	1	0.5
Piarists	1	0.5
Redemptorists	1	0.5
Sisters of Notre Dame	1	0.5
Divine Word Missionaries	1	0.5
Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul	1	0.5
	187	

3. POSSIBLE STRUCTURAL CAUSES FOR THE ABUSE SCANDAL

The large number of victims, and even more that of abusers, seems to provide striking empirical evidence refuting the belief that solely individual black sheep are involved.

Catholic Church's basic positions concerning sexuality

Compulsory celibacy is frequently mentioned as a possible cause for the sexual violence done to children in a Church setting. There are some priests who take advantage of children to express their frustrated sex drive. At the same time, celibacy plays no role at all in a number of cases, specifically those involving priests with pronounced pedophilic tendencies. The assumption that the Catholic Church's basic positions concerning sexuality and compulsory celibacy contribute significantly to the danger children face is also supported by the fact that reports involving Evangelical churches represent less than one percent of the total. This figure is far below the five percent of Austria's population who belong to one of these churches.

Exclusion of women from the priesthood and therefore leadership positions

A possible explanation for the total failure of the Catholic Church as an institution to deal with the problem of its employees abusing children would seem to be that half of humankind – women – have been and still are excluded from decision-making within the Church.

Catholic Church's authoritarian structure

The Catholic Church claims for itself absolute authority and demands obedience from its members and employees. Bishops must pledge complete obedience to the Pope. This fact is significant, as local churches receive strict orders from Rome on how to deal with the issue of sexual abuse of children. Bishops then have little latitude for independent action in these cases. How this crime must be dealt with is clearly outlined in church law: All suspicions must be reported to Rome, where all decisions are then made. All documents remain sealed. In many cases, files are never passed on to secular courts. The Church's conception of itself, which has developed over centuries, is to a great extent that of a state within a state.

Methods of dealing with the perpetrators: job security for abusers

There have been many reports of priests and members of orders abusing children and then being transferred. If they repeated their crimes at the new location, another transfer was the sole action taken. For many years this was the way the Church normally reacted to allegations of abuse. Even priests who were convicted in a court of law were returned to pastoral work after serving their sentences, which enabled them to find new victims. We received reports concerning two priests from other parts of Europe who were convicted in their home countries for abusing children sexually. They then spent decades working in Austrian parishes and boarding schools, where they committed the same crimes.

Avoiding damage to the Church's image in return for the victims' suffering

In cases where individual victims publicly accused priests of abuse, the most important objective of the responsible parties' reaction was to avoid damage to the Church's image. To this end, victims have frequently been slandered, and denials, silence and coverups went on for many years.

Political aspect: Austria and the Catholic Church

After the Catholic Church lost a powerful ally when the Habsburg Monarchy collapsed in 1918, it entered into an alliance with the Christian Social Party. The signing of the 1933 Concordat² between the Vatican and the Fascist Christian corporative state (*Ständestaat*) was an interesting development, and its effects can still be felt in the present day. After the Second World War the traditional alliance between the political powers-that-be in Austria and the Church was not immediately reinstated in the same form that had existed over centuries, but relations between the Catholic Church and the People's Party have been close during the Second Republic.

Unsatisfactory steps to deal with problem

The reactions to the flood of revelations involving abuse have been wholly unsatisfactory so far: Representatives of Austria's Social Democratic Party were not invited to a hastily arranged roundtable, nor did they make an effort to participate. No victims were present. Rather than examining past events, little more was discussed than prevention. While victims were not able to arrange a meeting with President Fischer, he made time for a photo op with the "Klasnic Commission," over which the Church exercised a great amount of influence.

To present, the federal government has not taken advantage of the opportunity to order a careful and independent investigation of this scandal. Allowing the Catholic Church, which bears the responsibility for this abuse due to many years of coverups and a failure to discipline the perpetrators, to investigate this matter by itself is tantamount to having the fox guard the henhouse. In no other matter would it be conceivable for an institution suspected of such action to determine the head of a board of inquiry.

Many victims of Church-related violence have the sense that their need for an investigation is not being taken seriously. No one is listening to them and, once again, they have been abandoned.

² <http://www.uibk.ac.at/praktheol/teilkirchenrecht/innsbruck/konkordat.html> (in German)

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The complete report (in German) can be downloaded at:
www.betroffen.at

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