

# Catholic sexual abuse in Denmark

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During the past five months the small Catholic community in Lutheran Denmark has been abhorred and overwhelmed by a flood of allegations of sexual abuse of children perpetrated by catholic priests. At the moment six of the current 73 priests of the Danish diocese have been convincingly accused of various sexual offences directed against children below 18 years and have been suspended by the diocesan bishop. In the lighter end of these cases, one case has dealt with child pornography and the perpetrating parish priest has returned to his home country, and another case has also been closed and the priest in question transfers to a diocese abroad.

The Catholic community in Denmark consists of approximately 35,000 members of which many have a family background of immigration from Catholic countries. After the protestant reformation changed Denmark into the Lutheran persuasion in 1536, practising the Catholic faith was allowed again in Denmark in 1849. Soon Catholic missionary orders came to Denmark as a new missionary field and started missionary work in traditional fashion with the establishment of nursing stations, hospitals and schools. The missionaries, however, also brought sexual abuse. Already in 1898 after the establishment of the jesuit boarding school of St. Andrews in Copenhagen, 15 cases of sexual abuse of small boys were revealed and at the time resolved in secrecy by transfer of the perpetrator to a Jesuit community abroad. Since that time sexual abuse has been happening in Catholic institutions and parishes without any public notice being taken until a few months ago.

At the moment Danish police has received allegations of sexual abuse against more than 30 catholic priests in Denmark. By far the majority has resulted in charges being dropped because the abuse is more than ten years old (statute of limitations). The specific cases have only sporadically been reported in the press but the entire Catholic community has been shocked by revelations of gross misconduct, violence or outright rape perpetrated by persons of trust against children. Perhaps even worse than this is the increasing documentation of secrecy or possibly cover-up operations being performed by the ecclesiastic authorities through decades.

After an inadequate or even inappropriate initial reaction by the current bishop of Copenhagen, Czeslaw Kozon, who tried to minimize press enquiries into possible cases of sexual abuse and also tried to reject any personal responsibility for revealing the truth if he were not legally required to do so, things have changed. Faced with an imminent and complete melt-down of church authority and possibly civil and even criminal charges the ecclesiastical leadership of the diocese chose to cooperate with the police. While this investigation is now mostly concluded a few cases still await a final judicial decision. At the same time the diocese has hired a solicitor to go through all cases of sexual abuse, whether they are old or new, in order to ascertain the facts as far as possible. A report with a comprehensive picture of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in Denmark is expected in 1-2 years!

Sexual abuse by Catholic priests is a global problem inherent in the way the hierarchy of the Catholic Church functions. This is not new. It reaches centuries back and has not been abrogated by the reforms of the 2. Vatican Council. Only now the truth can no longer be suppressed. More abhorrent stories of evil infiltrating the clergy of the church can be expected. Now we are no longer surprised. What we however long for are the reforms that will put the church of Christ back on the path of truth and love.

*Copenhagen, 8 July 2010*