CORRESPONDENCE

Sexual Abuse at the Hands of Catholic Clergy

A Retrospective Cohort Study of Its Extent and Health Consequences for Affected Minors (The MHG Study)

by Prof. Dr. med. Harald Dreßing, Prof. Dr. iur. Dieter Dölling, Prof. Dr. phil. Dieter Hermann, Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h.c. Dipl.-Psych. Andreas Kruse, Prof. Dr. phil. Dipl.-Psych. Eric Schmitt, Prof. Dr. iur. Britta Bannenberg, Andreas Hoell, Dr. phil. Elke Voss, and Prof. Dr. sc. hum. Hans Joachim Salize in issue 22/2019

A Lack of Gravity and Diligence

The article (1) leaves crucial questions unanswered: how many documented victims are there, and in how many has a confirmed mental disorder been documented as the result of a sexual crime committed by a member of the Catholic clergy? What is the proportion of clergy proved to have committed such a crime among the entire clergy? The authors mentioned 3677 sexually abused minors. They did not discuss whether and to which extent the unique reaction to the event—namely, that the Catholic Church will adopt a low threshold to pay 5000–10000 Euros to persons who claim to be victims—will trigger false accusations. If one thought that such payments did not lead to false accusation and the number of unreported cases as presumed by the authors did not decrease, then one would have to at least give reasons for this in the discussion section. What also remains unanswered is the question how many of all so-called acts that were perceived as inappropriate consisted of exclusively physical touching of non-primary or secondary sexual organs, because, in such a scenario, a crime cannot immedi-

ately be assumed. Some 30% of all those affected described being touched in what they experienced as an inappropriate way.

Especially victims of sexual abuse by members of the Catholic clergy would have deserved particular gravity and diligence in the scientific analysis. Instead, readers are left with the impression that the authors gave in to the temptation to construe on the basis of weak data causal associations relating to the customary topics criticizing the Church.

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Conflict of interest statement

The author declares that no conflict of interest exists.

Wrongfully Named and Shamed

It is very much to the credit of the Catholic Church that it is the only institution worldwide and (in Germany) nationwide that is seriously working on investigating and preventing cases of abuse in its own ranks. Where are the other institutions—youth offices, schools, the judiciary/legal institutions? In the article, the Catholic Church is once more named and shamed (1). If a patient complains of symptoms that may have their root in possible abuse, then, according to the authors' recommendation, "the possibility that a patient experienced sexual abuse in the context of the Catholic Church should be . . . cautiously explored." In 99.9% of cases, one should assume abuse not committed by the clergy. Furthermore, possible symptoms are so non-specific and the topic so precarious that doctors would be ill advised to tackle this during consultations. But they should retain an open mind if the subject is raised by patients. As a psychotherapist I have more than 30 years' experience of working with victims of abuse. One was male and had on one occasion experienced an indecent proposal from a priest that he did not take up. All other perpetrators were non-clergy,

mostly from the victim's immediate environment. None of these victims reported the perpetrator. The important subject of sexual abuse of children and adolescents deserves in the name of the victims to be tackled with technical expertise and without ideological blinkers. A female patient of mine who had been abused, recently remarked sadly: "Why is the discussion always about victims of the clergy? Are us other victims (the vast majority) worth less?" No, but the issue is not the victims, but to cause harm to the Catholic Church and distract from one's own guilt and oversights.

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In Reply:

It was by no means the authors' intention to criticize the Catholic Church or cause it harm, as the correspondence may imply. Rather, our study aimed to factually describe sexual crimes committed by Catholic priests or of which these priests were suspected, and which those in positions of responsibility in the Catholic Church dealt with inadequately and which, in some cases, had been systematically concealed (1). It is these internal events that have still not been uncovered in detail and cleared up that cause massive harm to the creditability of the Catholic Church—and not the publication of study results. Our study discusses in detail study options but also methodological limitations, some of which were imposed on the authors by the Church itself.

Indeed, numerous questions remain unanswered. Our article explicitly mentions the need for further studies. The subject of possible false accusations was also discussed in the article—and it raises concerns in the authors if an assumption is articulated that a payment of 5000 Euros in the context of the process of compensation in acknowledgment of the suffering that was caused to victims of sexual abuse might be a substantial stimulus for false accusations. This process was analyzed in detail in the context of the MHG Study (2). It was found that many victims did not feel they were being taken seriously during the process and experienced the amount of moneys paid as demeaning. A recent review article on the subject of the credibility of victims of sexual abuse emphasizes that the vast majority of accusations reflect the truth (3). A recent study on undiscovered cases of sexual abuse calculated a number of up to 114 000 victims—notably higher prevalence rates of sexual victimization of children at the hands of Catholic clergy (4). On the basis of this finding we can assume that in addition to the very small number of false accusations, there is a much larger number of

victims who to date have not even come forward about their experiences.

It is true that similar studies in other institutions have thus far not been undertaken but are urgently required. The Protestant Church is currently planning such a study. However, the Catholic Church commissioned the MHG Study, parts of which are discussed in our article, only after massive public pressure. There is no institution with a similarly high moral high ground as the Catholic Church. For this reason, it is not appropriate to point the finger at other institutions. The authors The authors are in complete agreement with the deliberations of Prof. Briken in the accompanying editorial, that the medical profession should attend to the results of the MHG Study (5).

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On behalf of the authors

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