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From The Times

February 16, 2010

Jesuits hard hit by high number of abuse claims

Roger Boyes in Berlin

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The sexual abuse scandal in Jesuit-run German schools is spreading rapidly and is likely to involve more than a hundred former pupils, according to the head of one of the affected colleges.

The impact on the Catholic order, the Society of Jesus, has been devastating, since the Jesuits have always boasted: "Give us the child for seven years and we will give you the man." Now it seems the order may lose some of its credibility, in Germany at least, as a pillar of Catholic education.

"I can imagine that we will reach a three-figure number," said Father Klaus Mertes, head of the elite Canisius college in Berlin, talking of the number of possible victims. He did not exclude a compensation package.

Manuela Groll, a lawyer representing many former pupils, said: "More and more victims are coming forward every day."

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The problems are not confined to the Berlin college, with cases of possible abuse being investigated at schools in Bonn, Göttingen, in St Blasien in southwest Germany, Hanover and Hamburg. At the Alosius college in Bonn, alma mater of Thomas de Mazière, the Interior Minister, and Stefan Raab,

one of Germany's top TV entertainers, the director has resigned after a parent accused him of complicity.

The claims date from the late 1950s to well into the 1990s but all, so far, fall under the statute of limitations, meaning that there will be no official criminal prosecution.

Instead, the order has engaged an independent lawyer, Ursula Raue, to look into the allegations. Some abuse victims say that she is too close to the Jesuits.

Most cases reported to the order so far occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Catholic priests speaking off the record say that, as leaders of church youth groups during this period, they were confused by the rapid changes in society. Pupils were caught up in the sexual revolution of that time and wanted to discuss their sexuality with the priests, many of whom were in their twenties. Until then, say the priests, Catholic education had an innocence about it. But the problems run much deeper. Many of the complainants say they were put under pressure to masturbate their priests. The Süddeutsche Zeitung carried an

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interview with an anonymous 62-year-old who has been active in politics for the past three decades.

He described graphically how, 50 years ago, he would be expected to enter the priest's room and perform a sex act. The priest left the college two years later, supposedly for health reasons, to a parish in the Tyrolean alps, where he died in 1972.

To judge by the testimony of the victims, this was part of a pattern of covering the tracks of offending priests. Serious sexual and psychological abuse appears to have been tolerated until word leaked out to parents.

The Jesuits have apologised to the victims but the order faces a long period of self-appraisal. Even within the order, the expectation is that the paper trail will show a record of shielding offenders and ignoring signs of child abuse.

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