

Abuse in the Catholic Church

"Do not be afraid to criticize the Church!"

German Jesuit Hans Zollner founded the world's first institute in Rome for the prevention of abuse. How difficult was that?

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Hans Zollner on the roof of Villa Malta in Rome, home of his new institute. In the background, the dome of St. Peter's Basilica © Ilaria Magliocchetti Lombi for DIE ZEIT

DIE ZEIT: Father Zollner, there is a rumor circulating in the Vatican that you will become the new Prefect of the Faith - that is, you will take over one of the most powerful offices in the Vatican. Most recently, it was held by the German Cardinals Joseph Ratzinger and Gerhard Ludwig Müller, and is still held by the Spaniard Luis Ladaria. What is the real story?

Hans Zollner: Nothing. The rumor only came up because I had an audience with the Pope the other day. Immediately before me was the mayor of Rome and before that Cardinal Ladaria.

ZEIT: Ladaria's successor will be decided soon, and there is currently speculation about German, American and Italian candidates. Ladaria is a Jesuit like you and Pope Francis.

Zollner: That's right. He is prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, where the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, of which I have been a member for nine years, is also located. But the rest is nonsense.

ZEIT: And why were you with Francis now?

Zollner: Because after more than 20 years of work in abuse prevention, I personally stand at a point where I ask myself: what is the best thing I can still do in the future to support victims of abuse in the Church? That's why I wanted to talk to the Pope about new tasks.

ZEIT: And how did he react?

Zollner: Positively.

ZEIT: Actually, you should be pleased with what you have achieved: We are talking to each other here in Villa Malta, a beautiful house with a great tradition, where a new Institute for Abuse Prevention has resided since last summer - which you fought for.

Zollner: The location of Villa Malta was already special in the time of the ancient Romans: a hundred meters above the Tiber, with a view over the city. In the Renaissance, a palazzo was then built, which later became the guest house of the Bavarian king and the embassy seat of the Knights of Malta. It is a privilege to be here.

ZEIT: The villa was also a meeting place for the German Romans. How did it come into the possession of the Jesuit Order?

Zollner: After World War II, the Jesuits acquired the site and built a library that today contains 500,000 books. Six floors are below ground level, four floors above. Our institute is fortunate to have use of the fourth and fifth floors. It belongs to the Pontifical Gregorian University and is officially called the "Institute of Anthropology - Interdisciplinary Studies on Human Dignity and Care." The title is unfortunately unwieldy. But the alternatives "Child Protection" and "Safeguarding" were not feasible. I have learned over the years that with the word "abuse" many people automatically shut down. They are not ready to face the issue.

ZEIT: By "people" do you mean believers?

Zollner: No, I mean everyone. I am a professor of psychology and a psychotherapist by profession, and from my field I can tell you: Abuse is a reality that is suppressed. Despite all the media reports. The media also have a hard time staying on top of it. And most people who are not affected by it themselves dismiss the topic as unpleasant and burdensome. I notice this in how difficult it is to find sponsors for our prevention work.

ZEIT: It is now exactly one year since the Archdiocese of Munich and Freising presented the largest German study to date on abuse and cover-ups. So far, there have been hardly any consequences for the cover-ups. Instead, church leaders repeatedly complain that it is unfair that the churches are criticized so harshly for crimes that occur throughout society.

Zollner: It is true that the sinister combination of physical, psychological and sexual violence has always existed everywhere. But that should not be an excuse to deny sexual violence and abuse of power within the church. We established a Center for Child Protection on January 1, 2012, because we wanted to educate and train church personnel: How do we prevent perpetrators from having an easy time? How do we create a safe environment for those in need of protection? At any rate, I was not taught this knowledge in my training. Today, I train bishops, religious superiors and school directors on five continents. We teach them how abuse of power works, how to recognize it and how to prevent it. First, we pushed through a diploma course in Safeguarding and then, in September 2021, we founded our new institute.

ZEIT: How difficult was it to achieve that? And who helped you?

Zollner: We started with the Center for Child Protection under Pope Benedict, who had issued stricter rules against sexual violence. The Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors then was established in 2014 under Pope Francis. Both were important for the work that I was doing. However, concrete support came as early as 2011 from the then-Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Munich and Freising and from the then-Minister of Education, Annette Schavan. I was pleased that ten years later, in October 2021, Chancellor Angela Merkel visited us at Villa Malta and discussed our work with us.

ZEIT: And what was the resistance then?

Zollner: When we organized a scientific congress on abuse and prevention at the Gregorian University in 2012, the topics were even more fraught with fear than they are today, and we were watched with suspicion. Nevertheless, the prefects of important congregations, that is, the heads of the dicasteries of the Holy See, also attended. A supporter even then was Charles Scicluna, the Vatican's chief prosecutor for abusers. In the years that followed, I experienced resistance again

and again during lecture tours - less so in the West in more recent times, but in Eastern Europe and also in Italy as well as Spain.

ZEIT: Is it particularly the Catholic countries that want to preserve their illusion of the innocence of the church?

Zollner: Some bishops still tell themselves: There is nothing like that here! But mostly I experience openness, even in regions where one does not expect it, because the Catholics there have other needs: for example in Africa and Asia. My first helpers on the ground are always women.

ZEIT: And how are things at the headquarters in Rome?

Zollner: I had a clear advantage in Rome because I was vice rector of the Jesuit Gregorian University for nine years. We are, after all, a training center for the ecclesiastical personnel of the universal Church, so I was in the right place to tell the young generation: We have a duty to confront abuse, and that includes sustainable prevention as well as *Aufklärung* (legal or forensic investigation) y *Aufarbeitung* (clarification of the past from a human, moral and spiritual point of view, in order to facilitate a better present and future). But I admit that it took me several attempts to push through the establishment of an independent institute. This was urgently needed so that we could have our own teaching staff and no longer have everything resting on me alone. Now we have eight lecturers from six nations, plus a team of ten. Our quota of women is two-thirds.

ZEIT: Is it a coincidence that Jesuits are leading the way on the subject of abuse? In Germany, the former principal Klaus Mertes was the first churchman to take the side of the victims. You yourself preached prevention when no one in German dioceses was thinking about it.

Zollner: From my experience, I can only say that the pioneers of education and prevention have always been the victims. During my training, my eyes were opened first by a South American student in Munich, whom I cared for as a spiritual director, and then by a patient in therapy here in Rome. Both told me what they had suffered. In both cases, however, the perpetrators were not priests. I first understood the ecclesiastical dimension of the crimes through the "Spotlight" revelations in Boston and through a workshop by the American priest and psychologist Stephen Rossetti at our university in the early 2000s. What Rossetti said about sexual violence against children was so frightening that I realized: We urgently have to confront this! Our German Jesuit Provincial had always urged this, but in our part of the world it was not understood for a long time. For Germany, Klaus Mertes brought the turning point with a press conference on January 28, 2010: Now, the Church can no longer ignore the issue.

ZEIT: Nevertheless, many victims have the impression that nothing is happening. They receive too little assistance. They have to fight for compensation. Do you also feel angry about this?

Zollner: Of course! Many of those affected thought in the past and think now that I am the head of a Vatican authority entrusted with coming to terms with the crimes. But I am only a scientist and a university teacher, not a lawyer, not a criminologist, not a prefect of the faith. My task is to ensure the least possible abuse in the future. Nevertheless, I try to answer all inquiries made to me by those affected.

ZEIT: You were advisor to the abuse studies for the dioceses of Cologne and Munich-Freising. Why was so much covered up? And why are people still reluctant to admit it?

Zollner: It is the stubborn resistance and the fact that one only admits what can no longer be concealed is often due to the bishops' fear of having to take personal responsibility. Another obstacle is the belief that one was called into office by God and therefore cannot be recalled, except by the pope. But it is by no means only bishops, but also simple parishioners, who think they are doing the church a favor by protecting its image in public. They do not understand that it is exactly the other way around: the more one denies, the more untrustworthy the church appears.

ZEIT: Both Pope Emeritus Benedict and the current Pope Francis still made reference in 2019 to how widespread abuse was outside the church as well. The public took that as an excuse and relativization. What did you think of the remarks?

Zollner: I didn't find them helpful. Of course, I know figures like the one that in 2022, a child protection organization would have blocked well over a billion attempts on the internet to access pedo-criminal content. Or that the WHO warns ten to fifteen percent of all under-18s suffer sexual violence. But does that help the church's victims? No.

ZEIT: The Jesuit order and Pope Francis are currently under criticism because a prominent artist, a Jesuit named Rupnik with the best connections to the church leadership, is said to have sexually exploited numerous women.

Zollner: Yes, he apparently abused them from his position of spiritual power. And he is said to have absolved a nun with whom he had a sexual relationship in confession.

ZEIT: What do you teach your students as the most important lesson from the abuse scandals?

Zollner: We have a double crisis in the church: the crisis of abuse and the crisis of cover-up. But everyone can do something about it. Not only through listening and accompanying, but also by

having the courage to enter into conflicts. I tell students: do not be afraid to criticize the Church! Only then can we change it.

ZEIT: In February 2019, you organized the first public conference for the world's bishops on the topic of abuse. Was that difficult?

Zollner: No. The Pope called me in October 2018 and asked me to do this. He said: "Come see me, I would like for you to organize a conference in the Vatican." - We then discussed that it should not only be about the crimes of abuse as such, but also about their cover-up. That's how it was done, and the Pope supported the request. It was important to me that those affected speak to the bishops and that we stop defending the Church as a spotless edifice.

ZEIT: How do you feel about victims criticizing church prevention as a "fig leaf" for its failures in coming to terms with the past?

Zollner: I understand the accusation. But what would be the alternative? No prevention until everything has been cleared up?

ZEIT: Are you in favor of the German churches handing over the responsibility of investigating to the state?

Zollner: Yes. But I doubt that the politicians want that. As early as 2020, I campaigned for a truth commission among parliamentarians in the Bundestag in Berlin. What has come of it? Nothing so far!

ZEIT: How do you yourself endure the years of dealing with the topic of abuse?

Zollner: Prayer, hiking, rowing and good friends. That allows me to sleep. My parents gave me a good physical constitution, and I have been through a few crises on my spiritual path. This helps me to remain with those who are affected and to endure the darkness with them.

ZEIT: Recently, at a gala of the victims for their supporters in Rome, an American called you "holy" and presented you with an oil painting of yourself. Why didn't you hang the painting in your office?

Zollner: I was deeply moved by the gratitude of the people concerned. It was even more moving to accompany them to meet the Pope the next day. But I don't want to hang the painting. I would not feel comfortable with such an exaggeration of my image.

HANS ZOLLNER

He persistently fights for child protection in the Catholic Church: Zollner has traveled to more than 70 countries to educate religious congregations and dioceses about the dangers of sexual abuse. The psychologist and theologian directed the Center for Child Protection, which in 2021 became the Institute of Anthropology at the Pontifical Gregorian University. The Jesuit, 56, is a native of Regensburg, Germany.