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Sex abuse crisis gives new momentum to dissidents

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(AP) ROME — The clerical sex abuse crisis is energizing Roman Catholic dissidents who want to open up the priesthood to women and ditch celibacy requirements.

They marched on Rome Tuesday even as Pope Benedict XVI called on priests to converge on the Vatican to cap a yearlong celebration of the priesthood. And in a sign of the deepening crisis, the faithful in traditionally Catholic Austria are at the forefront of demands for change.

In Rome, church reformers demanded changes in the male-dominated church structure they say is responsible for covering up priestly sex abuse for decades, pressing their case on the eve of a three-day rally of the world's priests summoned by Benedict.

What was meant to be a year of celebration has turned into one marred by revelations of hundreds of new cases of clerical abuse and Vatican inaction to root out pedophile priests.

Representatives from a half-dozen pro-women's ordination groups denounced Benedict's rally, saying the Vatican shouldn't be honoring priests amid a clerical sex abuse scandal.

"The worldwide shocking disclosures of sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church and its concealment for decades clearly shows the scandalous aberration that can be caused by a supervalued male priesthood with forced celibacy," said Angelica Fromm, a representative of We are Church, a reform group born after an infamous clerical abuse scandal in Austria.

We are Church is one of many reform groups calling for women's ordination and a relaxation of the church's celibacy requirement for priests.

While progress in the women's ordination campaign seems far away since church doctrine holds that only men can be priests, there are indications that the tradition of a celibate priesthood may see some change — albeit not under Benedict.

A grassroots movement in Austria has a powerful champion in Vienna's archbishop, Cardinal Christoph Schoenborn — a papal confidant who has openly called for an honest examination of issues like celibacy.

Another Austrian bishop, Eisenstadt Bishop Paul Iby has also said it should be up to priests to decide whether they want to live a celibate life and that he would welcome it if married men could be ordained. Iby has also said that eventually the ordination of women should be considered.

Pro-women's ordination groups staged a brief, peaceful protest in St. Peter's Square on Tuesday. The dozen or so protesters were stopped by police and told to leave.

"The Vatican is all too happy to turn a blind eye when men in its ranks destroy the lives of children and families, but jumps at the chance to excommunicate women who are doing works and responding to injustice and the needs of their communities," said Erin Saiz Hanna, executive director of the U.S.-based Women's Ordination Conference.

An estimated 9,000 priests from around the world are expected to attend Benedict's rally, which amid the scandal morphed into a show of support for the pontiff under fire for the Vatican's handling of abuse cases.

It's not clear whether Benedict will address the abuse scandal during his two public events Thursday and Friday, but news reports and a high-ranking Vatican official have said he may.

Also converging on Rome Tuesday ahead of the priest rally were representatives of the main U.S. clerical abuse victims group, Survivors Network for Those Abused By Priests. They demanded Pope Benedict XVI use the occasion to issue an apology and a zero-tolerance policy to keep abusive priests away from children.

They also demanded the immediate halt to the beatification process of Pope John Paul II pending an investigation into his knowledge of cover-ups of clerical abuse. Among the most egregious cases of alleged Vatican inaction in abuse involves the founder of the Legionaries of Christ, the Rev. Marciel Maciel, who was held in great esteem by John Paul for his ability to attract vocations.

Recent news reports in the National Catholic Reporter have said Vatican officials received payoffs from Maciel and otherwise turned a blind eye to allegations of Maciel's misdeeds for decades.

Last month, after conducting an investigation, the Vatican said it was taking over the conservative order after determining that Maciel had led a double life "devoid of any scruples and authentic sense of religion" that allowed him to abuse young boys unchecked.

The Vatican admitted no wrongdoing, however.
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