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The BBC has found evidence that a known paedophile returned to work as a priest in 1985. It is the latest in a long line of abuse cases to tarnish the Catholic Church's image. By BBC News Online's Megan Lane.

There was a time when, almost without exception, a priest was regarded as a respected member of the community.

Today, the news that yet another cleric has been accused of sexually abusing children is not uncommon.

Religious affairs commentator Andrew Brown says revelations that Archbishop Cormac Murphy-O'Connor - then a bishop - allowed a known paedophile to continue working as a priest, will damage the church's reputation in the UK.

John Wilkins, editor of Catholic weekly The Tablet, says the image of the church has been tarnished "appallingly" by paedophile priests around the world.

"It has done enormous damage to priests themselves - their morale is very low. They feel depressed and defensive.

"It has been appalling for church - there is mistrust between parishioners and their priest, the general public and priests."

Since 1994, the Catholic Church has had strict child protection procedures.

Previously, a suspected paedophile priest would most likely be shuffled sideways to another parish. Today, the church authorities inform the police, move the alleged abuser to a safe house, and suspend him or her from pastoral duties.

Last October, Pope John Paul II sacked Father John Lloyd, who

“ There is mistrust between parishioners and their priest, the general public and priests ”

John Wilkins

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raped a 16-year-old girl and indecently assaulted two altar boys in south Wales - the first such dismissal of a British priest in recent history.

The Pope dismissed American three priests in 1998, and sacked two diocesan priests in Ireland in recent years.

Yet Mr Wilkins questions whether those at the top of the church hierarchy take the issue seriously enough. The Pope has twice received the former archbishop of Vienna, Hans Hermann Groer, at the Vatican, despite allegations that he had sexually molested young clergymen.



Archbishop Murphy-O'Connor defends his decision

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Public apology

The Irish government has launched an inquiry into allegations of abuse at so-called industrial schools, where children were detained if their parents were deemed too poor to look after them, or if they stole or played truant.

The 52 schools, run by Catholic religious orders and backed by the government, closed in the 1970s.

Campaigners say the priests and nuns subjected most of the children in their care to physical or sexual attacks.

Following these and other allegations made during the 1990s, the Christian Brothers, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate and the Sisters of Mercy have issued public apologies for abuse inflicted over the years in their institutions.

The Christian Brothers have also been implicated in sex scandals in Canada. More than 300 former pupils at Mount Cashel orphanage, Newfoundland, have alleged the lay brothers abused them.

The scandal forced the order to sell property and assets to pay legal and compensation bills.

Compensation

In 1998, the Roman Catholic Church in Dallas, Texas, agreed to pay more than \$30m to 12 former altar boys molested by a priest.

Church authorities allegedly ignored warnings and covered up Father Rudolph Kos's activities. He is serving a life sentence for

Losing faith

4,257,789 Catholics in England and Wales in 1980; 4,189,550 in 1998

Mass attendance: 1.3m in 1988; 1.05m in 1998

Priests: 7,021 in 1988; 5,600 in 1998

Catholic Directory figures

more than 1,300 attacks carried out between 1981 and 1992.

Back in Britain, this year the victims of convicted paedophile Father Eric Taylor have said they plan to sue the church for failing to protect them.

Taylor is serving a seven-year prison sentence for sexual offences against children in Father Hudson's Homes in the 1960s, a Catholic charity.



Earlier this month, Father James Murphy pleaded guilty to 18 charges of indecent assault against seven children at south London parishes from 1976 to 1990. He attacked some of his victims in church itself.

A string of allegations led to tough child protection rules

In April, prison authorities in Ireland moved Father Eugene Greene to another jail following attempts to kill him. The retired priest is serving a 12-year sentence for abusing altar boys.

Four years ago, Father Adrian McLeish, of Durham, was jailed for six years. He had abused four boys - the sons of parishioners - and boasted about it on the internet. Police had seized the UK's biggest collection of child pornography from his home.

Although Mr Wilkins says it would be difficult to link the scandals to the falling numbers attending mass, "it certainly won't put attendance up."

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