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One of the department heads at the Vatican's doctrinal congregation has resigned from his post, days after an NCR report noted he had been accused of soliciting a woman for sex in the confessional.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith announced Jan. 29 that Fr. Hermann Geissler, formerly the head of the office's doctrinal section, had stepped down the day before in order to "limit the damage already done" to his employer.

The statement from the Vatican office also confirmed that Geissler's case is being examined formally, stating the priest "affirms that the accusation made against him is untrue, and asks that the canonical process already initiated continue."

The claim against Geissler was brought forward publicly two months ago by Doris Wagner, a German who recalled being approached by the priest during confession in 2009 at a Nov. 27 Rome event focused on giving voice to women survivors of clergy sexual abuse.

NCR reported the accusation Jan. 21, following Geissler's listing by the Vatican Jan. 18 as a member of the doctrinal office taking part in an international meeting of Asian bishops' conference officials in Bangkok.

Geissler is a member of the *Familia spiritualis Opus* religious community, known colloquially as "the Work." Wagner was a member of the same community until 2010.

In a brief interview Jan. 29, Wagner expressed confusion over several points in the Vatican's statement announcing Geissler's resignation. She also wondered why the priest is resigning now, when she had reported his conduct to the doctrinal congregation with the help of a canon lawyer in 2014.

"It feels like they are just trying to prevent the worst from happening, so it's just another PR measure," said Wagner.

"It's not that they would have understood and acted appropriately," she said. "It's just to prevent any damage for the institution."

While the Vatican's Jan. 29 statement says that Geissler disputes Wagner's accusation, Wagner says that in response to her 2014 report to the doctrinal congregation she was told the priest had admitted to the accusation and had asked pardon.

Wagner provided NCR with a 2014 letter from her canon lawyer, in which the lawyer summarizes the doctrinal congregation's response to Wagner's original accusation.

In a section of the letter quoting directly from the congregation's response, it states: "Because of his imprudent gestures on two occasions, that [Geissler] admitted and for which he asked pardon, he was admonished and, in addition, he was instructed to be vigilant and prudent in the future."

Solicitation in the confessional is generally considered very serious by the Catholic Church, which teaches that confession is a sacred opportunity for faithful to obtain forgiveness for sins and reconcile with God.

The Code of Canon Law prescribes that a priest found guilty of solicitation "be punished, according to the gravity of the delict, by suspension, prohibitions, and privations." It specifies: "In graver cases he is to be dismissed from the clerical state."

Wagner wondered if Geissler would be subject to any of those penalties.

"Canon law does not foresee resignation as a penalty for this *sollicitatio*," she sad. "There are other measures to be taken there. And I am wondering if they are going to take them. I doubt it."

Wagner also wondered about the "canonical process" the Vatican said would be examining Geissler's case.

"I don't know anything of this process," she said. "And I have never been contacted to give witness as to what he's done to me."

"I'm wondering what this canonical process is about, who is leading it, when was it started, [and] what are they actually investigating," said Wagner.

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