News



A woman near the cathedral in Frankfurt, Germany, holds a sign Jan. 30, 2020, that reads, "No coverup for those guilty of abuse!" (CNS/ KNA/Harald Oppitz)

by Catholic News Service

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The Catholic Church has become Germany's first institution to agree to fixed and binding rules for investigating sexual abuse cases.

The agreement, described as historic by the German government's abuse commissioner, could become a blueprint for other institutions in the fight against abuse. The Protestant Church in Germany and churches in many other countries have yet to take that step, reported KNA, the German Catholic news agency.

The eight-page agreement, drafted by the bishops and Johannes-Wilhelm Rorig, the German government's independent commissioner for sexual abuse issues, obliges the bishops to appraise abuse in their diocese according to fixed and transparent rules.

The agreement also will deal with cases that can no longer be prosecuted due to the statute of limitations or the death of the parties involved. In addition to examining the number of cases, it will look at how church officials in the dioceses dealt with perpetrators and victims. Moreover, it will examine and identify structures that enabled or promoted the sexual abuse of minors by clerics and church employees.

The accord, reached after a year of intense talks, calls for the creation of independent commissions that will be set up in all dioceses and will include victims alongside experts from the church, science, justice and administration.

The agreement was announced in a media statement April 28. Negotiations started following the 2018 publication of the research project on sexual abuse of minors perpetrated by Catholic clergy in Germany.

Rorig and Bishop Stephan Ackermann, spokesman on abuse issues for the German bishops' conference, agreed on key points at the end of last year, but wording was not finalized until recently.

To foster cooperation among the dioceses in the investigation, an office will be set up at the German bishops' conference to arrange meetings and coordinate monitoring. A final report is planned in five years.

Rorig and Ackermann must now sign the agreement before each of the 27 dioceses states a commitment to adhere to its standards. Rorig plans to hold talks on this with the bishops in the coming weeks, KNA reported.

In dioceses that have already carried out a comprehensive reappraisal, the respective bishops can sign an adapted declaration that takes into account the work done so far.

Each diocese must state on its website that it has committed itself to the standards. However, there is no concrete timetable yet for implementing that requirement.

In March, the German bishops' conference agreed on a system to compensate victims with sums up to 50,000 euros ($54,000). The dioceses must now implement the criteria and standards.

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