News



The chairman of the Catholic German Bishops Conference, Cardinal Georg Baetzing, speaks to the media during a press conference following an online meeting of the organization in Bonn, Germany, Thursday, Feb. 25, 2021. (Sascha Steinbach/Pool via AP)

by The Associated Press

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The head of the German Bishops' Conference said Feb. 25 that the country's Roman Catholic church is suffering from a "scandalous image" amid mounting anger over the Cologne archbishop's handling of a report on past sexual abuse by clergy, but he defended its overall record in addressing the issue.

The Cologne archbishop, Cardinal Rainer Maria Woelki, faces discontent after keeping under wraps for months a study he commissioned on how local church officials reacted when priests were accused of sexual abuse.

Woelki has cited legal concerns about publishing the study conducted by a law firm. He has commissioned a new report, which is supposed to be published March 18.

There has been criticism within the German church of Woelki. The head of the German Bishops' Conference, Limburg Bishop Georg Baetzing, has described the crisis management in Cologne as a "disaster" but said earlier this week that the conference has no "sovereignty" to intervene.

After a regular meeting of the country's bishops, Baetzing said Feb. 25 that they take the effects on the church "very seriously."

A Cologne court this month announced that it was raising the number of appointments available for people seeking to formally leave the church to 1,500 from 1,000 starting in March, amid strong demand.

"Every person who leaves the church hurts, and we perceive it as a reaction to a scandalous image of the church that we are currently delivering," Baetzing said at a news conference.

"Certainly, there are things in the Cologne archdiocese that need to be cleared up," he said. "But focusing solely on the archbishop of Cologne would be short-sighted."

Baetzing said he can say "with a good conscience" that Germany's bishop stand by their pledge to get to the bottom of sexual abuse of minors by clergy.

"A lot of good things have already happened," he said, with successful investigation efforts taking place "in the shadow of Cologne."

Revelations about past sexual abuse have dogged the church in Germany and elsewhere for years.

In 2018, a church-commissioned report concluded that at least 3,677 people were abused by clergy in Germany between 1946 and 2014. More than half of the victims were 13 or younger when the abuse took place, and nearly a third of them were altar boys.

In January, a new system drawn up by the church to compensate abuse survivors took effect. It provides for payments of up to about 50,000 euros ($60,760) to each victim. Under a previous system in place since 2011, payments averaged about 5,000 euros ($6111.)

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