News



A carnival float depicting a sleeping Cardinal, reading '11 years of relentless processing of cases of abuse' is set in front of the Cologne Cathedral to protest against the Catholic Church in Cologne, Germany, Thursday, March 18, 2021. (AP Photo/Martin Meissner)

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A report commissioned by Germany's Cologne archdiocese on church officials' handling of past cases of sexual abuse found 75 cases in which high-ranking officials neglected their duties. The findings on Thursday prompted the archbishop of Hamburg to offer his resignation to Pope Francis.

The report, commissioned by Cologne Archbishop Rainer Maria Woelki, absolved Woelki himself of any neglect of duty with respect to abuse victims.

However, Woelki's late predecessor, Cardinal Joachim Meisner, was accused of two dozen instances of wrongdoing such as failing to follow up on or report cases of abuse, not sanctioning perpetrators or not caring for victims. Meisner retired in 2014 and died in 2017.

Hamburg Archbishop Stefan Hesse — who previously was a senior church official in Cologne — was faulted for 11 cases of neglecting his duty.

Later Thursday, Hesse posted a video statement in which he conceded that he had made "mistakes" in the past, and said he very much regretted if he caused new suffering to victims or their relatives "through my action or omission."

"I never participated in cover-ups," he said. "I am nevertheless prepared to carry my part of the responsibility for the failure of the system."

"To prevent damage to the office of the archbishop and to the Hamburg archdiocese, I am offering my resignation to Pope Francis, and I am asking him to relieve me of my duties immediately," he said.

The lawyer in charge of the report, Bjoern Gercke, told reporters in Cologne that his investigation touched on the cases of 314 abuse victims — a majority of them boys under the age of 14 at the time of the abuse — and 202 people accused of abuse in the Cologne diocese since 1975.

The focus wasn’t so much on what the suspects did to the victims, but more on whether the church — former and current archbishops, vicars-general and other high-ranking church officials — responded correctly to accusations of abuse.

Altogether, the report found 75 cases in which eight high-ranking officials neglected their duties to either follow up on, report or sanction cases of alleged abuse by clergy and lay church employees, and failed to take care of the victims.

Woelki infuriated many local Catholics over recent months by citing legal concerns to keep under wraps a first report on how local church officials reacted when priests were accused of sexual abuse. He commissioned the new report — an 800-page investigation based on church files and put together by a German law firm.

Gercke said the first report, by a Munich law firm, also had concluded that the current archbishop wasn't guilty of any wrongdoing. The Cologne archdiocese has the most Catholics of any in Germany, some 1.9 million.

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In a first response to the new report, Woelki said the investigation confirmed his fears that high-ranking officials were guilty of not having reported perpetrators and thereby preventing their prosecution.

“My predecessors, too, are guilty — as of today it is no longer possible to say 'We didn’t know,’” Woelki said, adding that he would send the report to the Holy See in Rome.

Woelki said he also would temporarily suspend two Cologne church officials based on the findings of the investigation. One of them, Auxiliary Bishop Dominikus Schwaderlapp, said he had offered his resignation to Pope Francis. The report found Schwaderlapp neglected his duty to inform and report abuse allegations in eight cases.

German Justice Minister Christine Lambrecht said the report demonstrated anew “what horrific sexual violence children and teenagers had to suffer in Catholic institutions.”

“Child abuse is not a internal church matter, but a crime that must be examined and decided by criminal courts ” the minister said.

Jens Windel, 46, the founder of a support group for clergy abuse survivors,. watched a livestream of the news conference about the report on his laptop with other victims outside Cologne's landmark cathedral.

The report, he said, “trivializes the severity of the cover-ups that took place.”

There has been fierce criticism of Woelki's handing of the previous report. The head of the German Bishops’ Conference, Limburg Bishop Georg Baetzing, last month described the crisis management in Cologne as a “disaster.”

A Cologne court last 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.

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 (nearly $60,000) to each victim. Under a previous system in place since 2011, payments averaged about 5,000 euros.