News



A participant of a rally of the initiative Maria 2.0 holds a poster with the inscription 'No offices for cover-ups' in front of the cathedral in Cologne, Germany, Thursday, Nov. 18, 2021. (Henning Kaiser/dpa via AP)

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COLOGNE, Germany — November 18, 2021

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Germany's Roman Catholic archdiocese of Cologne held a service of penance Thursday for cases of sexual abuse by clergy, saying the ritual was not an absolution for the perpetrators but a “confession of guilt.”

The German Catholic Church’s handling of sexual abuse reports has caused a crisis in Cologne, where the archbishop, Cardinal Rainer Maria Woelki, has taken a “spiritual timeout" on the advice of Pope Francis.

The archdiocese’s interim administrator, Auxiliary Bishop Rolf Steinhaeuser, led Thursday's service.

"A large number of crimes of sexualized violence against wards have been committed by priests and other church employees of our diocese,” Steinhaeuser said during the service at Cologne Cathedral.

The auxiliary bishop said that as the current head of the archdiocese, he is the “head of the perpetrator organization of the Archdiocese of Cologne,” German news agency dpa reported.

“This service does not end with forgiveness,” Steinhaeuser said. "We cannot absolve ourselves. Nor do we ask forgiveness from those affected, to make ourselves feel better.” Rather, he said, the service was intended as a ”confession of guilt, remembrance of those affected, intercession.”

Woelki, the Cologne archbishop, has become a deeply divisive figure in the German church.

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In September, Pope Francis decided to leave Woelki in office despite massive criticism over his handling of the church’s sexual abuse scandal. The pontiff instead gave the cardinal a “spiritual timeout” of several months after he made “major errors” of communication. The break runs from mid-October to the beginning of March.

A report commissioned by Woelki and issued in March found 75 cases in which eight high-ranking officials — including his late predecessor — 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.

Hamburg Archbishop Stefan Hesse, previously a senior church official in Cologne, was faulted for 11 cases of neglecting his duty. Hesse offered his resignation to Francis, who rejected it last week.

The report absolved Woelki himself of any neglect of his legal duties with respect to abuse victims. He subsequently said he made mistakes in past cases involving sexual abuse allegations but made clear he had no intention of resigning.

Woelki previously infuriated many local Catholics 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 second report, and a German law firm produced an 800-page investigation.

Karl Haucke, 71, who was sexually abused for several years at a Catholic boarding school, was not impressed by the church's service of penance. Haucke protested outside Cologne Cathedral with several other people Thursday.

He said the church had invited him to participate in the service but he refused to attend.

“It is inhumane to address me with the claim of repentance," Haucke told The Associated Press. "Of course, I have the choice to go there or not, but just addressing the topic can drive people back to their memories. It’s not the church’s place to do that.”

Haucke suggested it would have made more sense to offer the victims a space for a real investigation into the abuse.

“An alternative would have been for those who don’t want to act according to the rituals of the church to offer a different space at this memorial occasion," he said. "A neutral space where it’s not about repentance and prayer, but about serious interaction, investigation and coming to terms.”