News

Cardinal Rainer Maria Woelki of Cologne, Germany, is pictured during the second synodal ass

Cardinal Rainer Maria Woelki of Cologne, Germany, is pictured during the second synodal assembly in Frankfurt Oct. 2. The Cologne Archdiocese has ordered an examination of contracts awarded by Woelki and his vicar general for abuse reports. (CNS photo/Julia Steinbrecht, KNA)



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Cardinal Rainer Maria Woelki, currently on sabbatical following criticism of his handling of clerical abuse cases in the Cologne Archdiocese, faces further pressure following the announcement that contracts he awarded to lawyers and communications consultants will be investigated under canon law.

The German Catholic news agency KNA reported that Bishop Rolf Steinhäuser, interim head of the archdiocese, said there were indications that neither the property council nor the cathedral chapter had been involved in the awarding of contracts, as would have been required under canon law. Woelki and Msgr. Markus Hofmann, archdiocesan vicar general, awarded the contracts, KNA reported.

After a meeting with the council and chapter, Steinhäuser immediately commissioned two independent canon lawyers to examine the matter and informed the Vatican, the archdiocese said Dec. 7.

Earlier this year, after revelations about the handling of abuse reports in the archdiocese, a Vatican investigation said Woelki had made "big mistakes," especially in the field of communication, but had not wanted to cover up any crimes.

Woelki has taken a sabbatical of several months. Hofmann is continuing his duties as head of archdiocesan administration and asked Steinhäuser to grant him a leave of absence until the matter has been clarified, KNA reported.

Cardinal Marc Ouellet, head of the Vatican Congregation for Bishops, reportedly refused the request and instructed Steinhäuser to present the case in detail to the Vatican.

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Earlier in December, the archdiocese disclosed the costs of contracts awarded during the independent abuse investigation. The figures showed that between 2019 and 2021, some 2.8 million euros ($3.2 million) were spent from a special diocesan fund that clerics had paid into over decades.

Hofmann expressed regret about "the high costs of the reappraisal," saying, "This was a painful and expensive process." He added that with the investigation, the archdiocese had entered new territory in both legal and media terms and had paid dearly for it.

The archdiocese said 757,500 euros were paid for a first report by the law firm Westpfahl Spilker Wastl. Lawyers who reviewed possible infringements of libel law in the report were paid a further 600,000 euros. A second report by the law firm Gercke Wollschläger cost 516,200 euros.

The archdiocese spent around 820,000 euros in fees for communication consultants to assist the cardinal, who suffered a sharp loss of public confidence over his handling of the reappraisal. A news conference in March to present the Gercke report cost almost 90,000 euros.