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Vatican
German Cardinal Rainer Maria Woelki of Cologne smiles during a news conference in Cologne

German Cardinal Rainer Maria Woelki of Cologne smiles during a news conference in Cologne May 2, 2022. (CNS photo/Theo Barth, KNA)



by Catholic News Service

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COLOGNE, Germany — The Vatican believes Cologne Cardinal Rainer Maria Woelki and his vicar general, Msgr. Markus Hofmann, did not violate canon law in their funding of investigations and hiring of communications consultants, reported the German Catholic news agency KNA.

Cardinal Marc Ouellet, prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, wrote Cardinal Woelki that after an "in-depth study," the Vatican determined the financial institutions of the archdiocese did not need to be involved in the decision to spend 2.8 million euros from an episcopal fund. Journalists were given access to the letter May 3.

The decision comes as a relief to the crisis-hit leadership of the archdiocese, KNA reported.

After accusations of the mishandling of priests accused of sex abuse, Cardinal Woelki took a sabbatical from October 2021 to March 2022. His interim replacement, Bishop Rolf Steinhäuser, asked two church law experts to review the awarding of contracts to lawyers and communications consultants involved in producing reports

on the abuse. There was a suspicion that the property council and the cathedral chapter should have been involved in the decision under canon law.

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KNA reported that Cardinal Ouellet's letter said the episcopal fund, set up in 1952 by Cardinal Josef Frings of Cologne, was "not bound by the will of the founder." Therefore, Cologne archbishops were authorized to freely dispose of these financial means. There was also no legal obligation to involve the diocesan bodies, as the assets were not diocesan.

Cardinal Woelki voiced relief and spoke of "good news" from Rome. He expressed the hope that this would contribute "a little to calming things down in our archdiocese."

The communications agency, which alone cost 820,000 euros, had been called in by the archdiocese because of problems affecting its media department at the time, KNA reported. However, the archdiocesan leadership had failed to arrange a lump-sum contract or to set a time limit for the consultancy.

The episcopal fund was made up of contributions from priests' salaries paid in from 1952 to 1969. According to the archdiocese, 16.8 million euros were still in the fund at the end of 2020, 9.5 million euros less than at the end of 2019.

Among other uses, abuse victims also receive church payments fund in recognition of their suffering, because neither church tax funds nor diocesan assets are to be used for this purpose, KNA reported.

In 2019, Cardinal Woelki signed a statute for the fund defining its purpose as "the ideal and material promotion of special ecclesiastical needs and concerns in the Archdiocese of Cologne." The archdiocese has several special funds, which totaled 221.1 million euros at the end of 2020.