News



In this May 25, 2008, file photo, Bishop Franz-Josef Bode waves during the closing service of the 97th German Catholics Day in Osnabrueck, northern Germany. Pope Francis on Saturday, March 25, 2023 accepted a resignation request from a German bishop who asked to step down because of his mistakes in handling sexual abuse cases. Franz-Josef Bode became the bishop of Osnabrueck, Germany, in 1995. (AP Photo/Joerg Sarbach, File)

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Pope Francis on March 25 accepted a resignation request from a German bishop who asked to step down because of his mistakes in handling sexual abuse cases.

Franz-Josef Bode, who has been the bishop of Osnabrueck, Germany, since 1995, said in a personal statement that his decision to resign "has matured in me in recent months" and he hoped it would have a liberating effect on the diocese.

Bode explained that an interim report released in September on abuse by clergy in the diocese had revealed his mistakes. He acknowledged his responsibility as a bishop and said, "Today, I can only ask all those affected again for forgiveness."

Abuse survivor groups have accused Bode of failing to respond appropriately to some cases of abuse, German news agency dpa reported.

The head of the German Bishops' Conference, Bishop Georg Baetzing, issued a statement that noted Bode's resignation with "great regret and respect."

With his resignation, Bode "also takes responsibility for the topic of sexual abuse in the church, which has accompanied ... all of us for a long time," Baetzing said.

"Your will to come to terms, to improve the treatment of victims and perpetrators in your diocese, and also to bring about systemic change in our church have not let you go since," he added, addressing Bode directly in his statement.

A church-commissioned report on sexual abuse inside the Catholic Church in Germany in 2018 said 3,677 people were abused by clergy between 1946 and 2014. More than half of the victims were 13 or younger, and most were boys. Every sixth case involved rape, and at least 1,670 clergy were involved.

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Bode became auxiliary bishop in the archdiocese of Paderborn in 1991, and had been bishop of Osnabrueck since 1995, making him Germany's longest-serving active bishop.

Irme Stetter-Karp, the president of the Central Committee of German Catholics, an influential German lay group, expressed respect for Bode's decision.

"His resignation from office certainly marks an important step from the point of view of those affected, in order to make real progress in dealing with the abuse scandal," she said.

The pope has not yet responded to a resignation request from a German cardinal who also was accused of mishandling sexual abuse cases. The request from Cardinal Rainer Maria Woelki stemmed from a crisis of confidence in the Cologne archdiocese that started in 2020.

The crisis began when, citing legal concerns, Woelki kept under wraps a report he commissioned on how local church officials reacted when priests were accused of sexual abuse. The withholding of the report infuriated many Cologne Catholics. A second report, published in March 2021, found 75 cases in which high-ranking officials had neglected their duties.

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

Two papal envoys were dispatched to Cologne a few months later to investigate possible mistakes by senior officials in handling cases. Their report led Francis to give Woelki a "spiritual timeout" of several months for making major communication errors.

In March 2022, after his return from the timeout, the cardinal submitted his offer to resign but so far Francis has not acted on it.