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Members of the German bishops' conference pray before the tomb of St. Paul Nov. 17, 2022, during an "ad limina" visit to Rome's Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls. (CNS/Deutsche Bischofskonferenz/Daniela Elpers)



by Renardo Schlegelmilch

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On March 25, Pope Francis accepted the resignation of Osnabrueck Bishop Franz-Josef Bode, vice president of the German bishops' conference. This came as a surprise not just to the Germans. He is the sixth German prelate in only a few years to offer to resign, but the first one to have his resignation accepted by the pope.

Why do so many German bishops want to leave office? The story goes deeper than you might think.

Five years ago, in September 2018, there was a moment that continues to reverberate in the German church. The bishops presented a nationwide study uncovering at least 3,677 cases of sexual abuse of minors over some seven decades. In the following press conference, journalist Christiane Florin asked if any member of the bishops' conference had considered resigning over the findings.



German Cardinal Reinhard Marx of Munich and Freising, attends the fifth synodal assembly in Frankfurt March 9. (OSV News/Reuters/Heiko Becker)

The answer of then-president Cardinal Reinhard Marx: "No." This one simple word burned itself into the mind of the German public. Comparing the scandal to similar situations in politics or public life, people would expect or demand somebody to take personal responsibility. Yet it took almost five years for the first bishop to be able to take this step. But not at all for a lack of trying.

Bode, age 72, is the longest serving diocesan bishop in Germany. For almost 30 years he led the Diocese of Osnabrueck in the northwest of the country. Over the past couple of years he became one of the loudest voices calling for radical reform in the German church. In Germany's "Synodal Path" reform project he co-chaired the group working on new roles for women in the church and became a strong proponent of female ordination.



Bishop Franz-Josef Bode of Osnabrueck, Germany, vice president of the German bishops' conference, is pictured in a 2019 file photo. Bode has become the first Catholic bishop in Germany to resign in connection with the abuse scandal. (OSV News/KNA/Lars Berg)

When the German reform project actually found a majority for this proposal at their synodal assembly in Frankfurt in March, he couldn't hold back tears. Which was an unusual sight for such a stern, grumpy-looking, older bishop. A couple of days later his diocese made headlines, announcing another radical change: Blessings for same-sex couples should start straight away, and not after three years, as had been decided recently by the Synodal Path.

Why the rush? In hindsight, we now know. Already in January, Bode had asked Francis to accept his resignation. It seems that he was implementing the changes he could, to have everything already in place for his successor.

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But why exactly Bode decided to resign isn't 100% clear. There is a lot of speculation in the German public. Most people think and say he drew consequences for his role in the cover-up of sexual abuse. But he is also 72 and specifically pointed out that he does not have the energy to continue for three more years in office. This seems plausible as he had to take a longer break in 2019 after a serious illness. What the actual reasons were for the pope to accept his resignation we might never know, as the Vatican typically does not comment on reasons for appointments or resignations.



German Archbishop Stefan Hesse of Hamburg is pictured in an April 18, 2015, photo. (CNS/KNA/Matthias Greve)

But there is a bigger story here. After the scientific study the Germans published in 2018 and several smaller studies commissioned by individual dioceses, a number of German bishops offered their resignation to the pope.

The first diocesan bishop to do so was Stefan Hesse, Archbishop of Hamburg. After he was mentioned in a study alleging cover-up, he called a press conference in March 2021 and told the public he asked to pope to resign. Then months of waiting, and finally rejection. The Vatican said Hesse was regretting and atoning for his mistakes and should continue in his position as archbishop.

It was the same story with two auxiliary bishops in Cologne, Dominik Schwaderlapp and Ansgar Puff. Months later the next press conference: Marx, leader of the Archdiocese of Munich and Freising, offered his own resignation. He said his "No" from 2018 stuck in his mind and that it was time for someone to draw personal consequences for the abuse crisis.

This time it took the pope only a couple of days. Thank you for your letter, but please continue serving me as archbishop, said Francis. Marx, Hesse, the church and the German public were flabbergasted. Why wouldn't the pope let them leave? This led to quite some embarrassment, as Hamburg and Munich and Freising were now governed by bishops who didn't want to be bishops anymore.

Even more confusing is the case of Cologne Cardinal Rainer Maria Woelki, who has been in conflict with his diocese for years now. In 2021 the pope granted him six months off to reflect and then return to office. When he got back, he also officially offered his resignation. It's been a year since then, yet no decision has been made. The pope gets asked about this occasionally. His response: "I have his letter in my desk."



German Cardinal Rainer Maria Woelki of Cologne is pictured during the bishops' fall plenary meeting Sept. 20, 2021, in Fulda. (CNS/KNA/Harald Oppitz)

So four bishops got rejected, and one finds himself in limbo. And now with Bode the first German bishop was actually allowed to resign. What did Bode do differently? Some people say it's not the resignation itself, but the way he went about it. Unlike Hesse and Marx, he didn't announce his resignation with a press conference, but talked to the pope first, before going public.

It's no secret that relations between the Vatican and Germany are frosty. Maybe the pope feels pushed or bullied when German bishops announce their resignations to the press before talking to the Vatican.

Some people also see a political dimension in this. Did Francis remove Bode because he was a prominent reform-oriented voice of the Synodal Path? Francis is quite critical towards the German synodal process. This might seem logical at first, but why then didn't he remove Marx, who is even more outspoken about progressive reforms in the church?

Whatever the reasons are, the Vatican has allowed the first German bishop with a clear connection to the abuse crisis to resign. This is a big step indeed, but at least as big is the confusion in the German church now. What does a bishop have to do to be allowed to resign? At this point, we can only guess.

**Related:** German bishop resigns, cites responsibility in abuse scandal

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