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Vatican News



Swiss Bishop Joseph Bonnemain is pictured during a press conference in Chur, Switzerland, Tuesday, April 5, 2022. (Gian Ehrenzeller/Keystone via AP)

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The Vatican has ordered an investigation into high-ranking Catholic clerics in Switzerland in connection with sexual abuse, the Swiss Bishops' Conference said on Sept. 10.

The group said in a statement that there were allegations against several active and retired bishops as well as other clergy for their handling of abuse cases.

Specifically, they are accused of covering up abuse cases. There are also accusations that some committed sexual assaults themselves in the past.

"There are accusations against some of them of having committed sexual assaults themselves in the past," it said.

According to the bishops' conference, the Vatican received a letter with the allegations in May and subsequently appointed Swiss Bishop Joseph Bonnemain to head a preliminary investigation in June.

Bonnemain has a history of investigating sexual assaults around the church, the statement said.

Fr. Nicolas Betticher, a priest at the Bruder Klaus church in the Swiss capital Bern, confirmed to The Associated Press that he had written the letter, which first came to light earlier Sept. 10 in report by the newspaper Blick.

The letter, which Blick said it had obtained, accuses six bishops of having covered up cases of abuse. Beyond that, a bishop and three priests are accused of sexually molesting teenagers, the paper reported.

In a phone interview, Betticher told the AP he was motivated by a call from Pope Francis himself for members of the clergy to "announce" any signs of sexual abuse or cover-up that they may have come across, and by years of hand-wringing about sexual abuses cases that thwarted efforts at justice and the truth by victims and

their families.

He suggested that the Catholic church had professed to make an important reckoning and efforts to strengthen canon law about cases of sexual abuse and harassment in recent years, but mistakes were continuing.

"Twenty years ago, we did not have a sufficient legal basis and therefore we made a lot of mistakes," Betticher said. "Now, I see that for 10 years, we have continued to make mistakes and today, there is a kind of will to hide certain things, or not to be precise, and not to go through with the checks (of allegations of sexual abuse)."

"Today, we can no longer afford to simply say, 'Ah yes, I know, but I didn't do it quite right, but we'll do better next time.' That's over," Betticher added. "It completely discredits the church. And that's what disturbs me, because at the core, people tell us: 'We don't want to come anymore, we're leaving the church.' And that, for me, is unacceptable."

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Several of the clerics named in the Blick article rejected Betticher's accusations that they had not reacted properly to abuse allegations, the paper wrote.

The bishops' conference said in its statement that in addition to internal church investigations into the accusations, it had also notified the relevant Swiss public prosecutor's offices "of the cases mentioned in the letter."

The new allegations come just days before the presentation of a report on sexual abuse in the Catholic Church in Switzerland. The pilot study was commissioned by the bishops' conference and conducted by the University of Zurich. It will be presented on Sept. 12.

[Keaten reported from Lyon, France.]