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Bishop Ivo Muser of Bolzano-Bressanon, Italy, center, seen speaking Jan. 24, 2025 in Bolzano, stresses the need for transparency and accountability to restore credibility and trust in the church. His diocese became the first in Italy to issue a report on the abuse crisis when it released "The Courage to Look" Jan. 20, produced by a German law firm, Westpfahl Spilker Wastl in Munich. (OSV News/courtesy Diocese of Bolzano-Bressanone)



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BOLZANO, Italy — January 30, 2025

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The Diocese of Bolzano-Bressanone in Italy made history Jan. 20 by publishing the country's first diocesan abuse report, titled "The Courage to Look."

Experts called it a hopeful sign in a country where the Catholic Church has yet to tackle the abuse crisis and seek answers on the scale and scope of clergy abuse.

The Diocese of Bolzano-Bressanone released its report with representatives of a German law firm present. The firm, Westpfahl Spilker Wastl in Munich, produced the study.

"This is an important development," said Father Hans Zollner, a top expert on clergy abuse and founding director of the Institute of Anthropology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. He is a former member of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors.

Speaking to German Catholic Domradio, he said that "it is the first diocese on Italian state soil to present a report of this kind. A major signal effect is to be expected."

The diocese commissioned the report in November 2023, aiming to "shed light on past cases of abuse, strengthen prevention measures and offer help to those involved."

The Bavarian law firm independently reviewed archives and conducted interviews with victims and witnesses, with the bishop only learning about key findings of the report during the Jan. 20 presentation.

Speaking to the media Jan. 24, Bishop Ivo Muser of Bolzano-Bressanone stressed the need for transparency and accountability to restore credibility and trust.

"In addition to assuming personal responsibility, the bishop announced a series of concrete measures, including the establishment of an interdisciplinary group to examine the cases of accused priests who are still alive and the optimization of diocesan procedures," the diocesan website said.

Around 1,000 files were examined for the more than 600-page report that looked at cases from 1964 to 2023.

In 67 identified cases of abuse involving 41 accused priests, the report found, with a high degree of certainty, that 29 were abusers, and it also found that of 75 people who said they were affected, 59 of them were plausible abuse victims.

"I know you do not want to hear rhetorical words of dismay from me. Rightly so," Muser said. "However, let me say that I was deeply moved in particular by the descriptions of the cases and the personal pain that emerges so clearly from the report."

Gottfried Ugolini, project manager of "The Courage to Look," stressed the need for a change in mentality. "Looking, listening and acting must become the norm," he said, and church institutions are sensitized to introduce clear rules in dealing with children, he added.

The lawyer responsible for the report, Ulrich Wastl, who presented the study, said that the number of cases has fallen sharply since the 1990s, but that many of the offenses were known to the diocesan administration before 2010 and were not managed correctly.

There had been "massive mistakes" by decision-makers at various levels, partly out of ignorance, refusal or even with the best of intentions, said Wastl. In 24 cases of abuse, those responsible in the diocese had acted incorrectly or at least inappropriately, in some cases for years.

Muser said he takes personal responsibility for omissions during his time in office, including insufficient oversight of suspected priests, reluctance to take clear preventive measures against accused priests, and poor documentation outlining steps in handling abuse cases.

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In an unexpected turnout of the report, 51% of those affected were female, while only 18% could be clearly identified as male. In neighboring Germany, according to the local church's own abuse report, the male victims far outnumbered the female victims, Wastl stressed.

According to the legal experts, the results of the "The Courage to Look" project hardly differed from findings of German dioceses in terms of the systemic causes. Wastl cited immature sexuality, the isolation of priests and the "fatal" concept of the "presumption of innocence."

"This is carried around 'like a monstrance' by those who do not want to come to terms with the past," Wastl said.

The expert also cited "lay clericalism" as a major factor, indicating that Italian parishioners themselves want to protect their priests.

Parishes should therefore be more involved in the prevention of abuse and "combat the evil … at grassroots level," the lawyer said. The rapporteurs also recommended setting up independent ombudsman offices and getting more women into positions of responsibility.

With its study, which the Diocese of Bolzano-Bressanone has now completed on its third attempt, "The Courage to Look" could grow into the "The Courage to Act," said Wastl.

Zollner for his part said that the first Italian diocesan report doesn't necessarily mean there will soon be similar reports from other dioceses, indicating the reason might be found in the culture of the northern Italian diocese, which covers the northeastern region of South Tyrol and serves a predominantly German-speaking population.

"Italians, not only in the bishops' conference but also in general, naturally see South Tyrol as a special region, especially since German is spoken by the majority of the population there and the culture is very much influenced by Austrian and southern German elements. In this respect, it is a special place for Italy, and we will have to wait and see what the public reaction, including in the media, and that of the bishops' conference as a whole turns out to be," Zollner told Domradio Jan. 23.

Zollner's Institute of Anthropology was involved in the process of the production of the Bolzano report, after initial attempts to produce it were stopped by the diocese withdrawing funds for it — leading to protests — five years ago.

However, Muster Jan. 20 called the report's findings "shameful for the church," and Zollner acknowledged "there has definitely been a change in what he (the bishop)

has done."

"And we are very happy that we at the Gregorian Institute for Anthropology have been involved in this process over the last two years," he said, "and that it has been possible to accompany the Diocese of Bolzano-Bressanone in this process."

The priest said that Italian culture, including the media, has so far been reluctant to report on abuse cases, but with the first diocesan report, they were "more interested in the topic than ever before," seeing it as a hopeful sign.

"It is gradually seeping through to Italy and I assume that it will soon lead to further developments in the church as well," Zollner said.