

German bishops sorry, issue new abuse measures

Jonathan Luxmoore Catholic News Service | Mar. 1, 2010

OXFORD, England -- Germany's Catholic bishops have asked forgiveness from victims of sexual abuse at church-run schools and promised to "learn lessons" from secular institutions dealing with child molestation.

"We are assuming responsibility. We condemn the offenses committed by monks, priests and their colleagues in our dioceses, and we ask pardon, in shame and shock, from all those who fell victim to these appalling acts," the bishops' said in a February 25 statement.

"As bishops, we are concerned about cases of sex abuse by clergy and their collaborators. We want an honest clarification, free of incorrect considerations, whenever such occurrences are reported to us," the bishops said.

The statement was issued after a four-day meeting of the 67-member conference in Freiburg, Germany. The gathering was dominated by claims of past molestation at German Catholic schools.

It said the bishops' conference in 2002 issued guidelines for handling abuse allegations against priests. The guidelines were binding in the country's 27 dioceses and applied to all religious orders.

However, the bishops said they had been unaware of the extent of the problem and would ask independent advisers to help review the guidelines by summer and implement a plan for improved detection and prevention of abuse.

In late January, Canisius College, a Jesuit-run high school in Berlin, confirmed there had been persistent abuse by three priests between 1975 and 1983. At least 120 men have come forward since, claiming they suffered abuse by priests or lay teachers at Jesuit schools throughout the country dating to the 1950s.

The Jesuit order has apologized to victims and hired an attorney to discuss compensation with them.

In their statement, the bishops said they also opened a hotline for victims and appointed 54-year-old Bishop Stephan Ackermann of Trier, Germany's youngest ordinary, to oversee abuse claims.

The president of Germany's bishops' conference, Archbishop Robert Zollitsch of Freiburg im Breisgau criticized Justice Minister Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger Feb. 25 for claiming in a TV interview that all reported abuse cases had occurred recently and accusing the church of failing to cooperate with an investigation her ministry.

"These are false facts, and we expect the minister to withdraw her statement within 24 hours," Archbishop Zollitsch said. "No government members have ever led such harsh attacks on the Catholic church."

The archbishop said he planned to present details of the scandal to Pope Benedict XVI in March.

Meanwhile, Benedictine Abbot Barnabas Boegle, head of Ettal Abbey, resigned Feb. 24, Vatican Radio reported Feb. 26. In announcing his resignation, the abbot acknowledged that he had not followed church policy in

reporting to police every allegation involving the abuse of minors at a boarding school the abbey runs.

Eight former students charged they were abused by priests in incidents from the 1950s, 1970s and 1980s.

In Austria, prosecutors in Salzburg said Feb. 22 they were investigating abuse claims against a religious order priest. The Graz-Seckau Diocese subsequently confirmed Feb. 24 that an abuse victim had attempted to blackmail clergy for 1 million euros.

Bishop Egon Kapellari said he rejected paying "hush money," and would discuss the issue of sexual abuse involving clergy at the next general meeting of the Austrian bishops.

Elsewhere in Austria, a spokesman for the Vienna Archdiocese said Feb. 1 there were 17 reported cases of sexual abuse by priests nationwide in 2009. He said the Austrian church had implemented a "catalogue of measures" in 2006 to prevent abuse including the appointment of an ombudsmen and procedures for expelling offenders from the priesthood.

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