

Pope to meet top German bishop to address abuse

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Archbishop Robert Zollitsch of Freiburg, head of the German bishops' conference, arrives for the opening of the annual meeting of Germany's bishops conference in Freiburg Feb. 22. (CNS photo/Johannes Eisele, Reuters)

VATICAN CITY -- Pope Benedict XVI will meet with the head of Germany's Catholic bishops Friday, March 12, to discuss allegations of widespread sexual abuse of children in the pope's homeland.

The visit was scheduled previously, but the rapidly developing sex abuse scandal was sure to be discussed, Catholic News Service reported.

Archbishop Robert Zollitsch of Freiburg, president of the German bishops' conference, said through a spokesman that he will brief Benedict on some 170 abuse allegations involving children at Catholic schools. The charges, which surfaced in January, have prompted a possible criminal probe by prosecutors.

In addition, church officials in Regensburg confirmed March 5 that a former member of the boys choir there -- which was directed for 30 years by the pope's own brother, Msgr. Georg Ratzinger -- had filed his own allegation of abuse. Ratzinger said he was unaware of any history of abuse, but that he would be willing to testify to prosecutors.

"Enough. We must seriously clean up our church," Germany's Cardinal Walter Kasper told the Rome daily *La Repubblica*. "The guilty must be condemned and the victims compensated."

Kasper, a former bishop of Rottenburg-Stuttgart, is now the Vatican's top ecumenical official and a widely respected elder statesman in the church.

The German revelations come amid growing awareness of clerical sex abuse in other European countries.

Hundreds of abuse allegations in the Netherlands that have surfaced within the last week prompted the bishop of Rotterdam to call for an independent investigation there.

Last month, Benedict met with all 24 serving Irish bishops to discuss his forthcoming pastoral letter to Irish Catholics, which will be Benedict's first major document devoted to clerical sex abuse. The Vatican says the

letter will be released before Easter.

Noting the widespread nature of the problem, Kasper suggested that the pope's letter to Ireland might include a "more general analysis, that might even embrace the universal church and not just one nation. But it is the Holy Father who must decide that."

Vatican supports German bishops' probe into priestly sex abuse

By Sarah Delaney, Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY -- The Vatican fully supports the efforts of German bishops to investigate claims of child sexual abuse in Catholic institutions, even if the cases are decades old, *L'Osservatore Romano* reported.

"Full disclosure regarding abuse in Germany," said the front-page headline of the March 7 edition of the official Vatican newspaper. "The church is working rigorously to shed light on what happened in religious institutions," it said.

The article followed a letter posted March 5 on the Web site of the Diocese of Regensburg, acknowledging past cases of sexual abuse of young students attending the Domspatzen, the school that trains the elite boys' choir of the Regensburg Cathedral.

Initial news reports said the abuse may have occurred while Msgr. Georg Ratzinger, brother of Pope Benedict XVI, was serving as choirmaster at the school. But the Regensburg diocese said the cases occurred in the late 1950s, while Ratzinger held the post from 1964 to 1994.

Ratzinger told the Italian daily *La Repubblica* that no cases of priestly pedophilia had come to his attention during his tenure there, but that he would be willing to testify should he be summoned by German judicial authorities.

In an online letter addressed to students and parents, Regensburg Bishop Gerhard Ludwig Muller spoke of two former priests at the school who had been involved in incidents of pedophilia in the 1950s and subsequently jailed. The letter asked anyone with information regarding similar episodes to come forward and said it was seeking specifically a former student who had told German news media that he had been abused at the school.

In a news conference March 5, Bishop Muller said any claims of sexual abuse would be treated with "the maximum transparency."

The Vatican, wrote *L'Osservatore Romano*, "supports the diocese in its willingness to analyze this painful issue with decisiveness and openness, according to the rules established by the German bishops' conference."

The church's main objective, the paper wrote, "is to render justice to the victims." It said authorities from other institutions, including public schools, should adopt a similar attitude.

As has happened in the United States, Ireland, Australia and other countries, dozens of Germans have made claims recently that they suffered sexual abuse as children while attending Catholic schools. And as in those situations, the church leadership has been accused of protecting priests rather than children.

Cardinal Walter Kasper, a senior German prelate and the Vatican's chief ecumenical official, said in an interview in *La Repubblica* that priestly sexual abuse must be punished and the church must take responsibility.

"Enough! We need serious housecleaning in our church," he said, adding that "the pope is certainly not standing

idly by."

He called the sexual abuse of minors on the part of clergy "a criminal, shameful act and an inexcusable mortal sin."

Kasper said "the Holy Father is right in seeking clarity and demanding zero tolerance toward whoever is stained by such grave sins."

The leadership of the German bishops' conference will be meeting with Pope Benedict March 12 at the Vatican. The visit was scheduled previously, but the rapidly developing sex abuse scandal was sure to be discussed.

The pope met in February with Irish bishops to discuss the problem of widespread sexual abuse of minors in Catholic schools after a scathing independent report accused the Irish church of maintaining a culture of secrecy for many years.

The pope was to write a pastoral letter to Irish Catholics regarding what he called the "heinous crime" of priestly sexual abuse.

Kasper said that while the question of the pastoral letter was up to the pope, he felt that because "such a difficult problem has emerged not only in Ireland, but in Holland, Germany and the United States, perhaps it deserves a more general analysis that applies to the universal church and not just a single nation."

Claims have been made that some students had suffered physical and psychological abuse as well in German Catholic schools. Msgr. Ratzinger said that while he served at the school, "there was a climate of discipline and rigor ... but also of human understanding, almost like a family."

He said that he believed that there was "a certain animosity towards the church, and I see behind certain claims the intention to speak against the church."

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