

German bishops' conference investigating multimillion building project

Cindy Wooden Catholic News Service | Oct. 15, 2013
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The president of the German bishops' conference said he is following with "great attention and great concern" the case of a bishop accused of making false statements in court and under fire for allegedly spending close to \$40 million in renovations and new construction on his residence and diocesan offices.

Archbishop Robert Zollitsch, the bishops' conference president and recently retired archbishop of Freiburg, told reporters Monday that the conference has formed a commission to investigate the project in the diocese of Limburg, and he expected the head of the diocese, Bishop Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst, to do some serious "self-examination."

Zollitsch arrived in Rome on Sunday for the plenary meeting of the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization and for a regularly scheduled meeting of the officers of the bishops' conference with Pope Francis.

"I take the situation in Limburg very seriously," Zollitsch said. He said the situation in Limburg would be one of the topics of his meeting with the pope.

A Limburg diocese spokesman confirmed that Tebartz-van Elst flew to Rome on Sunday but would not say when or how long he would be away.

"The bishop has made it clear that any decision about his service as a bishop lies in the hands of the Holy Father (Pope Francis)," said a statement from the diocese. "He sees and regrets that many believers are suffering under the current situation."

Tebartz-van Elst has been accused of living extravagantly while cutting diocesan programs. For example, the renovation included the installation of a free-standing bathtub with a headrest valued at \$20,000. Questions also have been raised about how the renovation and construction project was funded and whether the bishop followed the requirements of canon law that large expenditures be approved by the diocesan finance council, the Vatican, or both.

According to Zollitsch, the investigating commission includes experts in canon law, finance and construction. He said the members were to begin their work this week and "clarify the costs" of the project, "how it was financed" and "how decisions were made to finance it."

In a separate allegation involving luxury, a state prosecutor in Hamburg issued an indictment against Tebartz-van Elst on Oct. 10, claiming he had given false testimony. The bishop had sued the magazine *Der Spiegel* for an article alleging the bishop flew first class on a trip to India for charity work.

In early September, Cardinal Marc Ouellet, prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, sent retired Cardinal

Giovanni Lajolo to visit the diocese to promote peace between the bishop and some of the diocese's priests. In the end, the bishop agreed to publish figures about the construction project and to cooperate with the bishops' conference commission.

Local media also report that in protest, Catholics are leaving the church by deregistering their Catholic affiliation, which stops payment of church taxes. While the Limburg district court usually sees three to four deregistrations a week, 20 people left the church on Oct. 10 alone, according to the court.

Public outcry has reached such a level that the German government commented on the situation.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said she considers the Limburg affair to be a great burden for Catholics, government spokesman Steffen Seibert said, according to a report Monday in *Die Welt*. Seibert said it is obvious that "a very difficult situation has been created for Catholic Christians [in Limburg] and their church."

"The German Government has no advice or suggestions to make but may I express the hope that a solution is found for the faithful and for the trust of people in their Church," he said, according to *Die Welt*.

Local media also reported that when Tebartz-van Elst flew to Rome on Sunday, he flew economy class on the Irish budget airline Ryanair. The diocese did not confirm this report.

[Freelance writer Moya St. Leger contributed to this report for *NCR*.]

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