

European bishops pledge new abuse initiatives

Jonathan Luxmoore Catholic News Service | Mar. 23, 2010

OXFORD, England -- Catholic bishops from the Pope Benedict XVI's native Bavaria have pledged to tighten procedures for handling abuse claims against local clergy.

"Our uppermost priority must be to seek the truth and create an open atmosphere which encourages victims to state what was done to them," bishops from the Munich and Freising and Bamberg archdioceses said in a statement after a mid-March meeting.

"We wish to investigate every suspicion and clear up every mistake," the March 18 statement said. "We therefore unanimously recommend revising our church's guidelines to include an obligation to register suspected sexual abuse with the authorities and physical abuses with the district attorney's office so it can immediately mount an independent investigation.

"As bishops, we must do everything in our power to prevent abuse."

The bishops also said they felt "consternation and shame" at reports of sexual abuse by priests in the south German region, which includes the pope's hometown of Marktl am Inn. It said the bishops would press for the German church's revised 2002 guidelines to include greater care in the selection and training of priests, and more effective abuse prevention in Catholic schools and organizations.

Meanwhile, Archbishop Reinhard Marx of Munich and Freising demanded closer church cooperation with judicial authorities and said Catholics should pray that victims would forgive their abusers "in the knowledge that healing comes from God."

"We must pray that the children and young people who suffered mistreatment and abuse in the church, at the hands of its associates, priests and order members, will find strength to endure," the church leader said in a homily during the meeting.

"God's mercy requires that we let ourselves be transformed by his love and placed on a new path -- not that we quickly pass over the truth, but that we say what is happening clearly."

Throughout several European countries bishops and clergy reflected on the March 20 letter Pope Benedict sent to Irish Catholics in which he apologized to victims of priestly sexual abuse and announced new steps to heal the wounds from the scandal.

Archbishop Robert Zollitsch of Freiburg, president of Germany's bishops' conference, said the letter also was "a summons for the church in Germany." He met with the pope March 12 to discuss clergy abuse in Germany.

Meanwhile, the German government's Berlin-based spokesman, Ulrich Wilhelm, said March 22 the letter was welcomed by Chancellor Angela Merkel for "openly advocating damages for injustice and better prevention."

In neighboring Austria, where at least 300 alleged clergy sexual abuse cases have been registered since February, Cardinal Christoph Schonborn welcomed the papal document as a "true pastoral letter." He also announced plans for a March 31 Mass of atonement in St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna.

Msgr. Franz Schuster, vicar general of the Archdiocese of Vienna, said in a March 23 interview with Austria's Catholic news agency, Kathpress, that a church working group under his leadership had met a day earlier to discuss standardizing procedures for handling abuse claims in dioceses and religious orders.

He said that the group proposed strengthening links between existing diocesan offices charged with investigating abuse allegations. The plan will be submitted to the Austrian bishops' conference for discussion at its June meeting.

In Switzerland, where more than 60 abuse complaints are being investigated by a church commission, a bishops' conference spokesman said March 21 the pope's letter would provide "a good occasion to survey and update" church guidelines adopted in 2002.

Abbot Martin Werlen of the Benedictine Abbey of Einsiedeln proposed March 21 that an international database of clergy suspected of pedophilia be developed and circulated to bishops.

In the Netherlands, the Catholic church's Help and Law organization, established in 1995 by the Dutch bishops to assist abuse victims, said March 21 the number of abuse claims had risen to around 1,100. Most accusations dated from the period between 1950 and 1970, the organization said.

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