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German bishops `ashamed' over abuse allegations

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BERLIN (RNS) German Catholic bishops expressed shame and shock Thursday (Feb. 25) over a sexual abuse scandal that has grown to as many as 150 separate allegations of abuse across several decades at multiple Catholic institutions.

The bishops' statement was released as prosecutors in Munich and Bonn launched their own investigations into alleged abuse at parochial schools.

"We are ashamed and shocked and we plead everyone for forgiveness and exculpation," the German bishops conference said in a statement at the end of its annual meeting. "We are not at the start of our dealings with these failures, even if we have, until now, underestimated their extent."

Among the new policies the bishops announced Thursday are a new office tasked solely with responding to abuse charges, a telephone hotline for reports of abuse and a review of existing policy within the country's Catholic church.

The scandal, which was revealed when a former Jesuit priest now living in Chile wrote a letter of apology to former students, has shaken the German church over recent weeks; civil officials and the media have criticized the church for not cooperating with legal investigations.

Church representatives say their guidelines called for alerting authorities "as soon as possible." The Thursday statement also called for a review of those guidelines.

Trier Bishop Stephan Ackermann will be the new appointee in charge of dealing with charges of abuse.

The organization We Are Church, a group of reform-minded lay Catholics, said the bishops have shown that they have finally "recognized the gravity of the situation."

However, the group also said that the church has not addressed the policies that created an environment conducive to the abuse.
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