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German Church apologizes, vows action on abuse

By Daniel Flynn

VATICAN CITY (Reuters) - The head of Germany's Catholic Church apologized to victims of child abuse by priests on Friday and met Pope Benedict who encouraged him to press ahead with tough new measures.

Archbishop Robert Zollitsch, head of the German Bishops' Conference, said his church would investigate numerous allegations of abuse in Catholic institutions, as well as counseling victims and taking measures to prevent abuse in the future.

But, amid calls within the Roman Catholic faith for a discussion of celibacy, Zollitsch strongly denied it was to blame, echoing comments made earlier in day by the pope himself.

"The German bishops are dismayed by what has happened and the acts of violence against children," Zollitsch said after a 45-minute private audience with the pope.

"A few weeks ago I asked forgiveness from the victims, something which I must repeat today in Rome."

Zollitsch said he had briefed Benedict about the situation in Germany, where more than 100 reports have emerged of abuse at Catholic institutions, including one linked to the prestigious Regensburg choir run by the pope's brother from 1964 to 1994.

"With great shock, keen interest and deep sadness, the Holy Father took note of what I had to say," Zollitsch told a news conference, adding they had not discussed Regensburg choir or Rev. Georg Ratzinger, who has admitted to slapping boys.

Zollitsch said he informed the pope of the German Church's plans for tackling the crisis, including the appointment of a special representative on abuse, and Benedict had encouraged the "decisive and courageous" adoption of the measures.

The archbishop said the German measures were separate from a rulebook being prepared by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith which oversees Catholic doctrine.

With the German Church still collecting information about the total number of abuse cases, Zollitsch also said it was premature to talk about compensation for victims.

The German lay movement, We Are Church, criticized the meeting for not spelling out concrete measures to be taken.

"Instead of apologizing to the victims from far-off Rome, Archbishop Zollitsch should go soon to meet victims, listen to them and seek ways and rituals of reconciliation with them," it said in a statement.

"It's unfortunate that Pope Benedict did not offer any words of sympathy for the victims or seek reconciliation with them."

It said the Vatican should "recognize sexual violence as a worldwide structural problem of the

Catholic Church that increasingly obscures the message of Jesus."

DELICATE FOR GERMAN POPE

As allegations multiplied in Austria and the Netherlands, the Vatican expressed alarm about the gravity of the crisis this week. Child abuse scandals in Ireland and the United States wreaked havoc on the Church's reputation and finances, with the U.S. Church paying some $2 billion in settlements.

The latest scandal is especially delicate for German-born Benedict, Munich's bishop from 1977 to 1981. With public opinion in Germany boiling as more cases of abuse emerge, the vice president of the Bundestag lower house, Wolfgang Thierse, called for him to apologize on behalf of those responsible.

Vienna Cardinal Christoph Schoenborn, a close ally of the pope, has called for the Church to discuss taboo issues such as celibacy, priestly training and changed social attitudes to sex.

But Benedict on Friday praised celibacy as "the sign of full devotion ... an expression of giving oneself to God and to others," making clear that there was no prospect of change.

Zollitsch, the leader of Germany's 26 million Catholics, said experts had found no link between celibacy and cases of abuse or pedophilia by teachers but the Church needed to discuss more openly the reasons why it was important.

"Celibacy is under attack and we will seek to establish a dialogue to better explain what celibacy is," he said.

He noted the German child abuse scandal was not limited to priests alone and he thanked the German government for convening a round-table on the issue for April 23 grouping Catholic and Protestant representatives, civil groups, teachers and victims.

Reports of abuse have emerged this week at the Odenwaldschule near Frankfurt, a secular institution associated with UNESCO, and the prestigious Vienna Boys' Choir, an Austrian cultural icon not linked to the Church.

(Additional reporting by Madeline Chambers in Berlin and Boris Groendahl in Vienna, Tom Heneghan in Paris; Editing by Robin Pomeroy)
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