

New Catholic Abuse Guidelines 'Are Only a First Step'

The German Bishops Conference has introduced new guidelines on dealing with suspected sexual abuse -- but critics say they do not go far enough.

The Catholic Church in Germany has introduced new guidelines on dealing with allegations of suspected sexual abuse. They are intended to get police involved more quickly and prevent cases from being covered up. Media commentators feel the new rules do not go far enough.

The Catholic Church in Germany has often been accused in recent months of not doing enough to tackle cases of sexual abuse within its ranks. Now the institution has taken steps to give better protection to victims - but critics say it has not gone far enough.

The bishop of Trier, Stephan Ackermann, announced new guidelines Tuesday for dealing with reported cases of sexual abuse. The guidelines, which come into effect Wednesday, are a revision of rules from 2002 which were criticized for being insufficient.

One of the main changes is that, under the new guidelines, public prosecutors will be informed about all suspected cases of abuse, unless the victim objects. The earlier guidelines had merely "advised" that priests contact prosecutors about "proven" cases of abuse.

Ackermann said it was important "to make sure that the new guidelines prevent cases of sexual abuse from being covered up." He explained that the new approach would mean that cases would be sent to police more quickly.

Another key point of the new guidelines is that offenders will not be permitted to work with young people in the future. Each diocese will also have to appoint a person who is not part of its leadership to act as the first point of contact for anyone who wants to report a case of suspected abuse by a member of the clergy, Church employee or volunteer.

Not Enough

Critics say the new rules do not go far enough, as they do not, for example, address the issue of financial compensation for victims. There has also been criticism of the fact that offenders can continue to work within the Church.

Christian Weisner of the pro-reform We Are Church group insisted there should be a "zero tolerance" policy on abuse. "Once he has been an offender, we really don't want someone like that in the diocese anymore, even working in a nursing home or a prison," Weisner told the Associated Press.

The new guidelines are a response to hundreds of allegations of sexual abuse by priests and other Church insiders that have come to light in recent months in Germany, plunging the German Catholic Church into crisis. The German Bishops' Conference asked Ackermann to revise the guidelines in February, after reports of abuse at Canisius College in Berlin, an elite Jesuit school.

German editorialists commented on the new guidelines on Wednesday:

SPIEGEL ONLINE writes:

"Things that should actually be obvious in cases of abuse -- even if they happen within the Catholic Church -- are now being presented as evidence of great progress, for example the rapid intervention of law enforcement authorities, better handling of the victims, a 'low threshold' for help and more prevention. Elsewhere -- in the Protestant church, for example -- such policies have been in place for a long time. The Catholic Church is only now starting to emerge from its parallel world within German society, at least on paper.

"Whether it is also changing in reality will have to be judged by the victims of sexual abuse, both in current and future cases. Most victims are still extremely unhappy about how the bishops have dealt with them. The new guidelines do not mean that their suffering is no longer an issue."

"The publication of the revised guidelines does not draw a line under the debate about abuse which has been raging for months. At best, it is the beginning of an attempt to solve much more deeply seated problems within the Catholic Church. The bishops are still a long way from being able to sit back and relax. The guidelines come too late for all previous abuse victims in any case."

The center-left Süddeutsche Zeitung writes:

"The new guidelines on handling sexual abuse are an example of the fact that good can even come out of desperation. Without the external pressure, without the victims of abuse that finally dared to make their suffering public, without the media who gave the victims a voice, the old rules from 2002 would not have been reformed. Sometimes it takes a scandal to force progress."

"The key thing with the new guidelines will be how the individual dioceses implement them in practice. ... Until now, the bishops have taken very different approaches in dealing with cases of abuse ... The value of the guidelines will therefore be seen in their concrete results, for example in the question of how much power and money the dioceses are willing to give up to help victims. In other words, the extent to which (the dioceses) value the human being over the institution."

The conservative Die Welt writes:

"The abuse scandal is like a millstone around the neck of the Catholic Church, even though most of the crimes happened years or even decades ago. The new guidelines for handling sexual misconduct by clerics could make the burden a bit more bearable. The guidelines make the victims' perspective and their protection from further sexual violence a priority."

"The bishops do not want to simply sit out the crisis. Instead, they are trying to make improvements, something that is fitting for an institution committed to continual renewal -- the Church as a learning organization, if you will. Nevertheless, the Catholic world is still a long way from being in order. The discussion about pathogenic ecclesiastical structures and about possible systemic causes of the sexual abuse of minors by priests and members of religious orders will continue, including within the Church itself."

The left-leaning Berliner Zeitung writes:

"The new guidelines may have come late, but at least they are there. It's true that no decisions have been made about compensating the victims, but there is reason to hope that a solution will be found soon. The hope that the Catholic Church will bring itself to make fundamental structural reforms has not, however, been strengthened with these guidelines. The real work is in any case still to come, namely the discussion about celibacy in the priesthood and attitudes toward sexuality. These guidelines are only a first, self-critical step for

the Catholic Church in its theological renewal."

-- David Gordon Smith

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,715076,00.html>

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