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German Church gets tougher on child sex

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Germany's Catholic Church unveiled on Tuesday tougher guidelines on investigating and preventing child sex abuse that it hopes will stop a repeat of the hugely damaging scandals of this year.

"The dreadful findings and experiences of recent months have shown us that the (previous) guidelines of 2002 were imprecise in some areas," said Stephan Ackermann, bishop of Trier, as he presented the new rules.

"It was important for us bishops to make sure that ... the new guidelines prevent cases of sexual abuse being covered up," Ackermann, who was tapped by the German Episcopal Conference to draw up the new code, told reporters.

Allegations of abuse will be reported to the police more quickly, while new rules will ensure that people who have abused children are under no circumstances given jobs working with young people, Ackermann said.

"We also want to make sure that as many victims as possible ... have the courage to come forward," Ackermann said in Trier, western Germany.

Like elsewhere in Europe, Germany was hit earlier this year by revelations that hundreds of children were physically or sexually abused in institutions throughout the country, all but a handful run by the Roman Catholic Church.

The abuse mostly took place several decades ago but the scandal has still done much to damage the standing of the Church five years after the election of the German-born Benedict XVI as pope was a source of great national pride.

The Church has said it failed to investigate properly claims of abuse and that in some cases there was a cover-up, with paedophile priests simply moved elsewhere instead of being disciplined and the police being called in.

Accusations have been made in 20 of Germany's 27 dioceses including in Munich and Freising, where Joseph Ratzinger, now the pope, was archbishop from 1977 to 1982.

Institutions implicated included a boarding school attached to Regensburg cathedral's thousand-year-old choir, run for decades by the Pope's brother. He has denied knowing about any abuse and has not been directly accused.

The head of the German Episcopal Conference, Robert Zollitsch, was also accused of allowing a monk suspected of child abuse in the 1960s to return to Zollitsch's diocese in 1987.

Prosecutors dropped their probe however, finding no evidence of criminal conduct by Zollitsch and saying that alleged abuse fell outside the statute of limitations, which in Germany expires 20 years after a victim turns 18.

In April the German government began a "round table" discussion involving Church leaders and victims and

other groups to discuss possible compensation, changes to the law and ways to prevent future abuse.

Justice Minister Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger on Tuesday broadly welcomed the Church's revised guidelines but said that some issues were still not completely clear.

Catholic reformist organisation We Are Church, which has been highly critical of the Pope's handling of the abuse scandals, was unimpressed, with spokesman Christian Weisner telling AFP they were only a "small step forwards".

<http://news.smh.com.au/breaking-news-world/german-church-gets-tougher-on-child-sex-20100901-14fse.html>

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