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German bishops expand sex abuse guidelines

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Germany's Roman Catholic church introduced new guidelines Tuesday on handling reports of sexual abuse that require prosecutors to be informed of any suspected cases.

The expanded guidelines come in response to hundreds of allegations of abuse at the hands of clergy that emerged earlier this year and rocked the church in Germany -- Pope Benedict XVI's homeland.

Stephan Ackermann, the Bishop of Trier who was tapped by church authorities to lead the revision of the 2002 guidelines, said special attention had been given to the issue of involving law enforcement officials.

"Because in the past it has led to misunderstandings, I stress again that the investigations by church authorities and by prosecutors are parallel investigations," Ackermann told reporters Tuesday in Trier.

The earlier guidelines only "advised" that priests contact prosecutors on their own in "proven cases" of abuse. Church authorities were not required to contact law enforcement officials.

Yet critics charged Tuesday that the revamped rules do not go far enough in addressing the issue of abuse, by failing to clarify issues of financial compensation for victims and by allowing offending clergy to continue to serve within the church.

"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," said Christian Weisner of the We Are Church group, insisting there should be a "zero tolerance" policy on abuse in Germany.

Under the new guidelines, offenders are to be removed from jobs involving work with children and undergo assessment by professionals to indicate what kind of jobs they are to be allowed to do.

The rules require each diocese to have at least one "commissioner" who is not part of its leadership to serve as the first point of contact for anyone wishing to report a case of suspected abuse by clerics, monks, employees or volunteers working for the church.

They also state that as soon as there are any facts on the suspicion of sexual abuse of minors a church figure "shall forward the information to the state criminal prosecution authority."

The new guidelines also define what is considered sexual abuse based on the definition used by common German law and require that suspected offenders be immediately removed from any duties that involve contact with children and young people.

Prevention measures include requiring anyone who works with children or youth to show proof of good conduct and undergo sensitivity training for personnel management.

The Bishops Conference reworked its guidelines amid criticism that it did not go far enough in involving law enforcement officials in sex abuse cases. The new guidelines are valid for three years, at which point they are to be reviewed again.

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