

German bishops' leader welcomes progress in national church dialogue

REGENSBURG, Germany (CNS) -- The president of the German bishops' conference welcomed progress in a national dialogue on the Catholic Church's future, inaugurated in the wake of sexual abuse scandals.

"This process is on the right track -- we're all getting a chance to make our voices heard," Archbishop Robert Zollitsch of Freiburg said March 1, at a news conference marking the end of the bishops' four-day meeting.

Archbishop Zollitsch said he hoped the dialogue would be advanced by the church's Katholikentag festival in May and a national eucharistic congress in 2013.

The Dialogue on the State of the Church, launched in June by 30 German bishops and 300 invited clergy and lay representatives, is to run till 2015, with each year examining a church task, including liturgy and witness.

The archbishop said the dialogue theme for 2012, "Diakonia: our responsibility in a free society," would give further impetus to the consultations, but he cautioned against "exaggerated expectations," noting that the church's 27 dioceses were "working at different speeds."

A March 1 bishops' conference statement said the dialogue was about "the challenge of social pluralism to the church and how best to demonstrate the church's public and charitable purposes."

"It could set a spiritual process in motion, which does not take decisions and formulate demands on the run, but asks openly and critically what the church of tomorrow needs," the statement said, adding, "This process is engaging many Catholics at various levels."

However, the assessment was criticized by Germany's dissenting "We Are Church" movement, which said lay Catholics would not be satisfied with "pro forma dialogues and beautiful visions."

"The German bishops initiated this dialogue process at the height of the abuse crisis. The faithful expect not just a church of listening and spiritual renewal, but of concrete pastoral steps," said a March 1 statement from the movement, which has demanded women's ordination.

Several hundred Germans have claimed molestation by priests and church staffers since allegations were made against a Catholic college in Berlin in January 2010.

Under August 2010 church guidelines, people who work with Catholic youth must now obtain police checks and undergo psychiatric tests, while the church's 27 dioceses must have independent ombudsmen and experts.

At their late-February meeting, besides discussing the national dialogue, the bishops debated the situation at Germany's 54 theology faculties and institutes, after new church data confirmed student admissions had dropped by half in the past 15 years. The sharpest decline was in Pope Benedict XVI's native Bavaria.

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