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Vatican suspends German 'Bishop of Bling'

Pope Francis has suspended the German Roman Catholic prelate aka the 'luxury bishop' from his diocese for spending \$42 million on his house.

BERLIN — Pope Francis has suspended a German bishop caught in a furor over a \$42 million renovation to his residence that features lavish fixtures and artwork and a reported \$20,000 bathtub.

Bishop of Limburg Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst, derided here in newspapers as the "Bishop of Bling," waited eight days in Rome before being granted an audience Monday with Francis.

Francis has been extolling the virtues of humility and modesty among the clergy since being named pope. He put Tebartz-van Elst on leave pending an audit into the diocese's expenditures, the Vatican said Wednesday.

German media, citing official documents, said the residence in the small city of Limburg in western Germany has a conference table that cost \$34,000 and a private chapel that cost \$4 million. The residence includes offices, private apartments, living quarters for nuns and a museum.

Tebartz-van Elst has defended the expenditures, saying that the bill was actually for 10 projects and that there were additional costs because of regulations on buildings under historical protection, according to the broadcaster Deutsche Welle.

Germany's main lay Catholic group, the Central Committee of German Catholics, praised the pope's action as creating "the necessary space to clear up completely and firmly the events in Limburg," said the group's head, Alois Glueck.

"Pope Francis' decision offers the chance of a first step toward a new beginning in the Limburg Diocese, because the situation had become an increasing burden for the faithful there and in all of Germany over recent weeks," Glueck said.

The German bishops' conference will investigate. Franz-Josef Bode, bishop of Osnabrueck, told the German newspaper Die Welt that there is doubt whether Tebartz-van Elst will return to duties in Limburg.

"I continue to think that the bishop returning to the Limburg Diocese and a new beginning there with Tebartz-van Elst are very difficult," Bode said. "There is a fundamental crisis of confidence in Limburg. The situation there is a mess."

Tebartz-van Elst has been under intense scrutiny in Germany since it emerged in court documents and news stories that the renovation of the building complex that serves as the seat of the diocese went tens of millions of dollars over budget.

The bishop tasked architect Michael Frielinghaus with creating a house of God that would "still be full of dignity in a century," the architect told German newspaper Sueddeutsche Zeitung. The clergyman put no limits on Frielinghaus' spending, the architect said.

In Germany, Christian taxpayers who belong to the church are required to pay 8%-10% of their income to support the church's operations. The church is not required to disclose its financial numbers publicly, but four

main dioceses opened their books this month in response to an outcry over the scandal.

"Most bishops don't have to take a vow of poverty, but the point of the priesthood in some ways is to serve, not to be served, to give, not to be given to," said Mathew Schmalz, theologian and professor at Holy Cross in Massachusetts. The German media have published numerous pieces about Tebartz-van Elst and allegations of his lavish lifestyle.

Tebartz-van Elst sued German magazine Der Spiegel last year after it reported he flew first class to India in 2012 to visit charitable projects. The Limburg Diocese said the bishop was flying coach but received an upgrade using his frequent flier miles.

Hamburg prosecutors are investigating an allegation that Tebartz-van Elst gave false testimony in the case.

"I think (the Vatican suspension) is a good decision," said Bernhard Dobelke, a priest in Solingen, a town north of Limburg. "Thinking about what to do and probing which of the allegations made against him are true is a good outcome."

In a sermon last month, Tebartz-van Elst acknowledged many had been hurt by decisions he had made "to the best of my knowledge and in good conscience" but which had been misconstrued.

"To those I have hurt or disappointed, I beg for forgiveness and indulgence," Tebartz-van Elst said in a video of the sermon released by the church.

Christian Weisner, spokesperson for the German branch of We Are Church, a group that has been critical of clerical authority and supports women priests and an end to priestly celibacy, says the problem is the "authoritarian attitude" of Tebartz-van Elst.

"Tebartz-van Elst once said, 'The church is where the bishop is,' but it should be the other way round: The church is where the bishop meets his flock – that is what Pope Francis is calling for, he wants good shepherds," he said.

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