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Consequences arising from the report on sexualised violence in the Archdiocese of Cologne

Cardinal Woelki and Vicar-General Hofmann outline concrete reforms after the publication of the report into the handling of sexualised violence in the Archdiocese of Cologne.

Cologne. The Archbishop of Cologne, Cardinal Rainer Maria Woelki, and his vicar-general, Dr Markus Hofmann, today outlined the initial consequences arising from the report produced by the law firm Gercke Wollschläger on behalf of the archdiocese. The report on the Independent investigation into the handling of sexualised violence in the Archdiocese of Cologne was published last Thursday. Today, a press conference was held to announce the first concrete steps and measures the archdiocese intends to take.

Cardinal Woelki began by stressing that by publishing the full, unredacted report on how the archdiocese handled sexualised violence, he had kept his promise. He added, however, that this was just "one mosaic stone" in a much larger process. "I will do everything I possibly can to make the Church better."

Monitoring by an external body will be made part of concrete governance and compliance structures. "In concrete terms, this means, for example, that the individual institutions will monitor each other, but they will also be monitored by independent, external bodies," said the archbishop. "It must and will no longer be possible to manipulate files or make them disappear," he said, adding that as part of this measure, an independent inquiry (investigation and reappraisal) would be set up to ensure progress is made.

"Quite some time ago, I issued an instruction that files may no longer be destroyed." For this reason, he explained, fundamental changes are needed in a number of areas.

The archbishop said that it is necessary to introduce a canonical reform that will eliminate contradictions between the guidelines of the German Bishops' Conference and canon law and to change a canonical practice that means that cases of abuse are sometimes viewed in Church law as just a breach of the vow of celibacy.

The Archdiocese of Cologne is part of the Catholic Church and the largest diocese in Germany in terms of number of members. About two million Catholics live in 180 groups of parishes on both banks of the River Rhine. Over 2,000 people work in the pastoral ministry. Together with a host of unpaid volunteers, they shape life in the diocese's parishes and approximately 800 churches. The seat of the archbishop is in Cologne, which is almost exactly in the middle of the archdiocese, which stretches from Bonn in the south to Düsseldorf and Wuppertal in the north. The archdiocese is led by the Archbishop of Cologne, Cardinal Rainer Maria Woelki.

He also announced reforms that would see management staff being given further training, especially in the handling of sexualised violence. An information reporting system recommended in the report will also be set up. This system will allow anyone who wants to provide information to do so anonymously.

Cardinal Woelki stressed that the following principle must apply to all future reforms: "the victims' perspective must guide our actions". He also made it clear that he is available to meet victims in person and invited them to get in touch.

Vicar-General Dr Markus Hofmann listed eight specific fields in which initial measures would be taken:

- the establishment of an independent inquiry. To this end, Cardinal Woelki signed a corresponding agreement with the Independent Commissioner for Child Sexual Abuse Issues Johannes Wilhelm Rörig on 15 March;
- the provision of funds for increased recognition payments to victims/;
- regular monitoring of clerics and lay people who have been charged with offences;
- the strengthening of staff and organisational structures in the field of intervention;
- the assessment and development of prevention measures;
- the future work of the Victim's Advisory Council according to the guidelines of the German Bishops' Conference;
- improved record-keeping by means of digitalisation, traceability, and protection against manipulation;
- changes to the formation of priests, including psychological assessment, a preparatory year that includes work on social projects, and greater involvement of women in the formation of priests.

The report identified the combination of systemic and personal responsibilities as the reason for decades of cover-ups in this area. "It is our job to ensure that we do not let up in addressing this subject," said Vicar-General Hofmann. "In line with the principle that it is better to speak a painful truth than a comforting lie we want to do our very best in matters relating to such inquiries."

When asked whether he intended to step down, Cardinal Woelki stressed what the assumption of responsibility means to him: "To simply accept moral responsibility and go – in order to protect the standing of the episcopate and the Church – would be too easy and is, in my view, wrong. I will accept and assume moral responsibility. Now and in the future, I will do everything within my power to prevent such mistakes happening again."

For more information on the independent investigation, please visit: https://www.erzbistum-koeln.de/rat_und_hilfe/sexualisierte-gewalt/studien/unabhaengige-untersuchung/

For more information in English, French, Spanish, and Italian, please visit: <https://www.erzbistum-koeln.de/independent-investigation>

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