



**Statement by the Spring Plenary Assembly
of the German Bishops' Conference
on Revelations of Sexual Abuse against Minors
within the Church's Sphere of Influence**

Revelations of sexual abuse against minors by clerics and church staff have shaken us in recent days. We bishops stand up to our responsibility. We condemn the crimes committed by the members of religious orders as well by priests and staff of our dioceses. Shamed and shocked, we apologise sincerely to all those who have become victims of these despicable deeds and beg their forgiveness.

1. Revealing the Truth

Those who sexually abuse children or youths often leave lifelong, painful wounds behind. In so doing, teachers and educators betray the trust of these young people to the very roots. They violate their most private sphere, rather than protecting it. Where the perpetrator is a priest, the crime is particularly grave. It contradicts the clerical office, because the priest exploits the particular closeness that people associate with a cleric. We German bishops are dismayed by each and every case of sexual abuse committed by clerics and other staff. We want to get to the roots of each case and inform the public openly and honestly, free from false considerations, even when incidents are reported to us that lie far in the past. The victims have a right to this.

2. Appraising the Guidelines

We are not at the beginning of a critical examination of such transgressions, even though we have far underestimated the extent to which it exists. Eight years ago we drew up the "Guidelines on How to Proceed in Cases of Sexual Abuse by Clerics Within the Sphere of Influence of the German Bishops' Conference" (*Leitlinien zum Vorgehen bei sexuellem Missbrauch Minderjähriger durch Geistliche im Bereich der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz*) on 26 September 2002. These Guidelines apply in all the dioceses. The "Union of German Heads of Religious Orders" (*Zusammenschluss der deutschen Ordensoberen*) has adopted them. They prevent cover-ups and concealments. The Guidelines promise victims and their relatives compassionate, therapeutic and pastoral support, which adapts to take into account each individual's

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personal circumstances. Each diocese has a liaison officer who can be contacted if grounds for suspicion or any other questions arise. We will do all we can to find out how their selection can be further improved and whether their work needs to be complemented by further individuals or ombudspersons. We attach particular importance to calling in the public prosecutors' office at an early stage. We actively support the authorities in their work.

We have asked some of those responsible in the human resources departments of our dioceses to review the Guidelines and their implementation with the assistance of independent external consultants. We expect to receive further-reaching proposals from them by the summer.

3. Intensifying Prevention

The past demands clarification and measures to prevent perpetrators from reoffending. This is why we obtain a report from a recognised specialist expert before we decide on the professional future of the perpetrator. And we will make this expert report obligatory.

The future demands that we take further steps towards comprehensive prevention. We call on the parishes and communities, and particularly on those responsible in our schools and youth work areas, to foster a culture of keeping their eyes open, focused and watchful. We support a pedagogical theory dedicated to strengthening and consolidating the personality of each and every child and youngster.

The call for prevention extends to all fields of society, where children, youths and youngsters maintain a particular relationship of trust towards adults and are, at the same time, dependent on them.

Germany has many civil society initiatives and public institutions that combat sexual violence against children and youths. They help to inform and educate, on the one hand, and contribute to intensifying prevention, on the other. We want to learn from these and engage in discussion with them as soon as possible, in order to gain a clearer understanding of what the Church can and must do to prevent sexual abuse within its own sphere of influence. We bishops are also engaged in talks with the victims. We will do whatever we can to ensure that the wounds can heal and that no new injuries are caused.

The celibacy of priests is, as experts have confirmed, not to blame for crimes of sexual abuse. However, a celibate life can only be promised by those who have the necessary human and emotional maturity for this. Prevention includes an appropriately thorough training of the future priests. This is why we are commissioning a report on whether we can offer the ordinands even better support and assistance in respect of their aptitude for celibacy in order to strengthen and consolidate their psychosexual development. We will additionally check to see what further-reaching forms of support are available to our priests in this respect.

Our pastoral and educational staff, too, have to be appropriately qualified and supervised.

4. Positioning Responsibility

The Bishop of Trier, Dr. Stephan Ackermann, is, with immediate effect, the Special Commissioner of the Bishops' Conference on all questions relating to the sexual abuse of minors in the Church's sphere of influence. He will be supported by an office, which we are currently setting up at the Secretariat of the German Bishops' Conference. It will extend the cooperation between the dioceses and the religious orders on all relevant questions and will be responsible for maintaining contacts with the civil society initiatives and the public activities. We are also launching a nationwide hotline to provide information on questions relating to the sexual abuse of minors within the Church's sphere of influence.

We German bishops would like to express our thanks to all those who have helped us in these weeks to shed light on and to appraise the wrongs and suffering done as far as the sexual abuse of minors in the Church's sphere of influence is concerned. At the same time, we would like to request the expertise and knowledge of those working outside the Church to support us. The great majority of priests and clerics perform their tasks with dedication and great credibility. We thank them and all the other staff, particularly those working in Catholic schools and in the field of youth work, for the great commitment they have shown and for continuing to provide this, unwaveringly and undeterred, in these difficult weeks. Lent gives us, particularly, the opportunity to search our consciences through confession and repentance, so that the witness we bear for our life remains credible.

Freiburg, 25 February 2010