

28 April 2021

Statement in the Freisen case

The Freisen case concerns a priest that stands accused of a number of sexual assault cases.

An unusual feature of the present case is that the diocese Trier was and is subject to oversight by no less than currently three incumbent diocesan bishops, even though they were exercising different functions at different times, meaning that their responsibilities, too, differed.

The investigation commenced in 2006 and is still ongoing. At that time (2006), the current archbishop of Munich and Freising, Dr Reinhard Kardinal Marx, was the bishop of Trier (until 2008). The vicar general was Dr Georg Holkenbrink (2005 until 2012), from 2012 also an official involved, amongst others, in the preliminary investigations for proceedings under Church law. In 2006, Dr Stephan Ackermann served as auxiliary bishop and member of the personnel commission and he has been in charge of this case as the bishop of Trier since 2009. The current bishop of Limburg, Dr Georg Bätzing, was the seminary dean in 2006 and as such a member of the personnel commission in the diocese Trier, he later dealt with the case in his position as vicar general (2012-2016).

With several investigations of the Public Prosecution against the accused priest, several injured parties and two preliminary investigations under Church law (2013-2015, 2016-2017), the case is highly complex.

The two preliminary investigations under Church law have further substantiated the allegations of sexual abuse (see <https://www.bistum-trier.de/news-details/pressedienst/detail/News/verdacht-des-sexuellen-missbrauchs-gegen-ehemaligen-freisener-pfarrer-erhaertet>). This is why the diocese reported the details for all suspected cases that arose in the meantime to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2017. The latter then ordered criminal proceedings under Church law to be initiated before the Metropolitan Court of the archdiocese Cologne and ordered the diocese Trier to surrender any and all files pertinent to these proceedings to the former (see <https://www.bistum-trier.de/news-details/pressedienst/detail/News/strafverfahren-wird-eingeleitet/>). These criminal proceedings are still ongoing.

The diocese Trier cooperated closely with the public prosecutor assigned to the case and surrendered the requested files.

More extensive files were surrendered to the ecclesiastical court as that court also dealt with cases for which the Public Prosecution had previously discontinued its investigations due to the procedural impediment of the limitation period. Unlike in 2006, the diocese attempted to investigate these cases itself.

So far, no financial compensation was paid to the injured parties because a final decision is yet to be made by the ecclesiastical court.

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The enquiries concerning the case are mainly dealing with the question as to whether the persons in charge are guilty of committing errors or even breaches of duty.

It is true that mistakes were made in this case, both in regard to the treatment of the victims as well as in the handling of the case itself. Back then and today those in charge in the diocese have repeatedly and publicly admitted these mistakes and have expressed their sincere apologies.

The bishops and any other individuals playing a central role in this case are willing to accept their responsibility. Accordingly, they hope that and will be grateful if and when the Independent Commission for the Investigation of Sexual Abuse in the diocese Trier looks into this case and issues for instance a recommendation as to what further steps to handle this matter could look like and what the consequences for the future should be.

Please understand that until the proceedings before the ecclesiastical court Cologne have come to an end, we will not answer any further questions or reply to individual requests.

Trier, Limburg and Munich, 28 April 2021

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