

STATEMENT DELIVERED BY CLAUDIA BURGSMÜLLER, LAWYER IN WIESBADEN

Independent external project observer

I was engaged as the project's independent legal observer (as an expert in matters of abuse and activities aimed recognising and resolving it) to provide external quality assurance. During the last nine months (September 2019 to June 2020), I have critically examined the first church project of this kind in the Diocese of Limburg based on its own milestones: "Listen to victims – prevent abuse". Whenever there were risks to the transparency of the work and implementation of the project on coming to terms with and preventing sexual abuse by clergy in the Catholic Church, I have named the weaknesses and intervened in a conflict-oriented way. There was no need for a public scandal, as within the project the Church has begun to tackle its culture of mistakes.

The project had an interdisciplinary team with equal numbers of men and women and marked a new departure, producing results that were to "break open" the rigid culture of silence (e.g. covering up by personnel supervisors) in the Diocese of Limburg. All nine sub-projects generated results (analyses, explanations and measures) that can be used for the following:

- to peel back and make changes to the authoritarian clerical structures of the Catholic Church,
- to immunise the male-dominated system against structures conducive to abuse (the MHG study),

because they were developed with the aid of external expertise and because the diocese has also shown that it is open to change.

In the view of the project observer, the proposed implementation concept for changes in the Diocese of Limburg is not a collection of "merely cosmetic measures" which critics had feared, but instead it delivers binding instruments for preventing future sexual abuse in the Diocese of Limburg, making progress on gender equality, and exposing and reducing situations of power imbalance and dependence. These instruments include the complaints management system to be introduced in combination with a disciplinary code for clergy, and the gender equality code. The gender equality code will also enable women to exert more influence in the Catholic Church and its bodies in the future.

The Church leadership, which in the past has utterly failed to protect children and adolescents from sexual violence, while engaging in a wide range of cover-up activities, must in future apply the innovative instruments developed in the project to eliminate structures and behaviours that encourage violence. Furthermore, the current personnel officers must work consistently to maintain a vigilant internal discourse within the Catholic Church in order to guard against sexual abuse.

The emerging process of publicly writing and speaking about the project's findings will help encourage women and men, girls and boys, who have experienced sexual violence in the diocese but have not been identified as victims so far, to tell their stories – either in a rectory or at a professional consultation. The process of recognition and resolution must be continued, not least because the analysis of dossiers in sub-project 1 found no names of accused priests who were born after 1966. This suggests that the real figure is much higher and explains the small number of victims who are prepared to speak about the abuse they suffered in the Diocese of Limburg during recent years.

The results of sub-project 4 indicate that the diocese should set itself the goal of “turning round” its communication with those affected. The sub-project not only developed guidelines for general communication with victims of sexual abuse, which are intended to prevent insufficient or harmful communication on the part of the diocese in the future, but also specified the creation of an office to deal with (sexual) violence, and the position of a communications officer, as specific implementation measures. In the future, victims should no longer feel that they are petitioners when they approach the organisation which wronged them and in which crimes were committed against them. Instead, the bishop himself should send them a letter offering them the opportunity to talk.

Sub-project 5 (clericalism and misuse of power) focused on reinforcing children's rights and creating options for children and adolescents to participate, analysed the existing structures in the diocese, and proposed establishing an ombudsman's office whose organisation and operations would be independent of the diocese.

Even if one has to summarise by saying that this project of recognition and resolution was working at its limits, in terms both of the material it could cover and of its organisational capacity, and the time pressure (nine months from start to finish) was too great, with an insufficient staff allocation for the project management (which from March onwards had to act alone), the overall concept, with its binding criteria and standards for tackling sexual abuse, proved to be appropriate and may be recommended to other dioceses as a consistent model with unified requirements and criteria. In addition, the initial experiences of an external project observer show that reflection beyond one's usual boundaries, and the possibility of intervention, foster the detection of aberrations and help to trigger new developments.

Realisation of the measures and instruments detailed in the implementation plan should be subject to external management and control by several different interdisciplinary bodies.

Check against delivery.