

Pope Accepts Resignation of High-Spending German Bishop

BERLIN — Pope Francis on Wednesday accepted the resignation of Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst, the bishop of Limburg, whose extravagant spending on renovations for his personal residence angered his congregation and ran afoul of the pontiff's message of humility and modesty for the Roman Catholic Church.

The Holy See accepted the German bishop's offer to resign, "given that it has come to a situation in the Limburg diocese that prevents Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst from fruitfully carrying out his duties," the Vatican said in a statement on Wednesday.

After mounting criticism over spiraling costs, the Limburg diocese confirmed in October that Bishop Tebartz-van Elst, 54, had poured at least 31 million euros, or about \$43 million, into the renovation of his residence and church buildings. The costs had originally been estimated at €5.5 million.

Last fall, the German news media carried reports of exorbitant indulgences by the bishop, including €15,000 on a bathtub and the costly reopening of the roof of his personal chapel to allow for the suspension of an enormous cross.

As discontent over the allegations mounted, the bishop traveled to the Vatican in October and offered his resignation to the pope. Pope Francis suspended him at the time, pending the outcome of an investigation by Germany's conference of bishops.

The Vatican said Wednesday that the bishop would be assigned another position in the church, but declined to give further details.

Germany's conference of bishops said it welcomed the pope's decision and vowed to use the case to improve the church's often opaque policy-making processes on financial and other important matters.

"We clearly feel there is a widespread need for the decision-making bodies and structures of the Catholic Church, which have grown over centuries and have proven themselves in many cases, to be made more clear and accountable," said Cardinal Reinhard Marx, the head of the conference.

Lay groups also applauded the Vatican's action as an important recognition of the discontent felt by many in German pews who view the Catholic Church as being out of touch with the reality of their lives and concerns. Germany's Catholics include some of the most liberal voices among the global church's 1.2 billion followers, and many have long pushed for change.

"Today's decision will and must serve as a signal for the whole church," said the liberal Catholic group We Are Church, which is very influential in German-speaking countries. "The monarchical view of a bishop's office that is not founded on Christian beliefs is out of date."

Pope Francis has been praised for his embrace of a less opulent papal lifestyle and for his steps to overhaul the ossified Vatican bureaucracy. He appeared Wednesday to be sending a clear message to the German faithful, whose numbers have decreased since a sexual abuse scandal that broke in 2010.

At his general audience on Wednesday, Pope Francis told the crowd in Rome that those ordained by the church are expected not only to lead, but to serve their congregations. "A bishop who is not at the service of

his community does no good,” the pope said. “The minister completely dedicates himself to his community and loves it with all his heart, it is his family. The bishop and the priest love the church in their community, they strongly love it.”

The 108-page report on the detailed investigation found that Bishop Tebartz-van Elst deliberately released false cost estimates to the public, because he “did not want the building to be a burden for him in public.” Even Cardinal Giovanni Lajolo, who was sent by the pope to investigate the situation in Limburg in early September, was not told the truth, the report found, based on a reconstruction of communications among those involved. Church officials refused to comment on whether Bishop Tebartz-van Elst had broken the law, but said prosecutors had been awaiting the outcome of the report, which they urged legal officials to examine.

Gaia Pianigiani contributed reporting from Vatican City and Victor Homola from Berlin.

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