



Archbishop Robert Zollitsch, then chairman of the German Episcopal Conference, speaks during a press conference at the Vatican, Monday, Oct. 14, 2013. Zollitsch is giving up the country's highest honor, the Order of Merit, which was bestowed on him in 2014, following scathing criticism this week of his handling of clergy abuse cases during his tenure as archbishop of Freiburg and as a personnel officer in the diocese. (AP Photo/Riccardo De Luca, File)

by Associated Press

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A former head of the Catholic German Bishops' Conference is giving up the country's highest honor following scathing criticism this week of his handling of clergy abuse cases during his tenure as archbishop of Freiburg and as a personnel officer in the diocese.

Robert Zollitsch has informed German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier in a letter that he is handing back the Order of Merit, which was bestowed on him in 2014, his spokesperson said in a statement on April 21.

He said the decision was taken in connection with a statement Zollitsch made in October, in which the 84-year-old acknowledged that he made serious errors and asked for forgiveness.

An independent report commissioned by the Freiburg archdiocese on the church's handling of abuse cases over decades was presented on April 18 — the latest in a string of such reports casting light on church officials' actions, or lack thereof, in dioceses across Germany.

One of its authors, Eugen Endress, said that Zollitsch completely ignored canon law in connection with abuse cases during his time in office. He said that, for example, a cleric's breach of celibacy rules was punished but that the abuse of children wasn't penalized under church law. "We were speechless," he said.

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Zollitsch was responsible for personnel issues in Freiburg from 1983 until he became archbishop of Freiburg in 2003, a position that he held until 2013. He was the head of the German Bishops' Conference from 2008 to 2014.

Freiburg, in Germany's southwestern corner, is one of the country's biggest dioceses, with about 1.8 million Catholics.

Its leadership decided on April 20 to take down portraits of Zollitsch and his late predecessor, Oskar Saier, at the offices of current Archbishop Stephan Burger.

Zollitsch didn't comment after the release this week of the report.

In addition to giving up the Order of Merit, he has informed Burger that he will forgo the privilege of being buried in the bishops' crypt at Freiburg cathedral, according to

April 21's announcement.