



Same-sex couples take part in a public blessing ceremony in front of the Cologne Cathedral in Cologne, Germany on Sept. 20. Several Catholic priests held a ceremony blessing same-sex and also remarried couples outside Cologne Cathedral in a protest against the city's conservative archbishop, Cardinal Rainer Maria Woelki. (AP/Martin Meissner)

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Several Catholic priests held a ceremony blessing same-sex couples outside Cologne Cathedral on the night of Sept. 20 in a protest against the city's conservative archbishop, Cardinal Rainer Maria Woelki.

Their protest was triggered by Cologne church officials' criticism of a priest from Mettmann, a town near Duesseldorf, who in March had held a "blessing ceremony for lovers" — including same-sex couples.

Officials from the Cologne archdiocese, which Mettmann belongs to, had reprimanded the priest afterward and stressed that the Vatican doesn't allow blessings of same-sex couples, German news agency dpa reported.

The blessing of same-sex couples on Sept. 20 was the latest sign of rebellion of progressive believers in Germany's most populous diocese with about 1.8 million members.

Several hundred people showed up for the outdoor blessing service for same-sex and also heterosexual couples. Waving rainbow flags, they sang the Beatles hit "All You Need Is Love," dpa reported. A total of about 30 couples were blessed.

The German government's LGBTQ+ commissioner called the service an important symbol for the demand to recognize and accept same-sex couples in the Roman Catholic Church.

"It is mainly thanks to the church's grassroots that the church is opening up more and more," Sven Lehmann said, according to dpa. "Archbishop Woelki and the Vatican, on the other hand, are light years behind social reality."

Catholic believers in the Cologne archdiocese have long protested their deeply divisive archbishop and have been leaving in droves over allegations that he may have covered up clergy sexual abuse reports.

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The crisis of confidence began in 2020, when Woelki, citing legal concerns, kept under wraps a report he commissioned on how local church officials reacted when priests were accused of sexual abuse. That infuriated many Cologne Catholics. A second report, published in March 2021, found 75 cases in which high-ranking officials neglected their duties.

The report absolved Woelki of any neglect of his legal duty with respect to abuse victims. He subsequently said he made mistakes in past cases involving sexual abuse allegations, but insisted he had no intention of resigning.

Two papal envoys were dispatched to Cologne a few months later to investigate possible mistakes by senior officials in handling cases. Their report led Pope Francis to give Woelki a "spiritual timeout" of several months for making major communication errors.

In March 2022, after his return from the timeout, the cardinal submitted an offer to resign, but so far Francis hasn't acted on it.

Germany's many progressive Catholics have also been at odds with the Vatican for a long time.

Several years ago, Germany's Catholic Church launched a reform process with the country's influential lay group to respond to the clergy sexual abuse scandals, after a report in 2018 found at least 3,677 people were abused by clergy between 1946 and 2014. The report found that the crimes were systematically covered up by church leaders and that there were structural problems in the way power was exercised that "favored sexual abuse of minors or made preventing it more difficult."

The Vatican, however, has tried to put the brakes on the German church's controversial reform process, fearing proposals concerning gay people, women and sexual morals will split the church.

On the night of Sept. 20, just across from the hundreds of believers celebrating the blessings of same-sex couples, there were also about a dozen Catholics who demonstrated against the outdoor service, dpa reported. They held up a banner that said "Let's stay Catholic."