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A cathedral door keeper and a woman wait in front of the Cathedral in Cologne, Germany, on Nov. 30, 2022. A court on Tuesday, June 13, 2023, ordered a German diocese to pay 300,000 euros (\$323,000) in compensation to a man who was repeatedly abused by a Catholic priest in the 1970s, a ruling that a victims' association said was the first of its kind in Germany. The state court in Cologne ruled in a case in which the plaintiff, a man now aged 62 who was abused more than 300 times by a priest, had sought 750,000 euros from the Cologne archdiocese, German news agency dpa reported. (AP Photo/Michael Probst)

by Associated Press

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A court on June 13 ordered a German diocese to pay 300,000 euros (\$323,000) in compensation to a former altar boy who was repeatedly abused by a Catholic priest in the 1970s, a ruling that a victims' association said was the first of its kind in Germany.

The state court in Cologne ruled in a case in which the plaintiff, a man now aged 62 who was raped and otherwise abused more than 300 times by a now-deceased priest, had sought 750,000 euros from the Cologne archdiocese, German news agency dpa reported. The archdiocese decided against invoking the statute of limitations in the case.

Presiding Judge Stephan Singbartl said that the court hadn't ordered higher compensation because the victim's life fortunately hadn't been destroyed, noting that he had married, had children and been able to work.

The German church has been making voluntary payments to abuse survivors. Victims' groups criticized the amounts as too small. A system that took effect at the beginning of 2021 provided for payments of some 50,000 euros per victim — replacing a previous program under which payments averaged about 5,000 euros.

An independent payment-setting body that decides on claims under that system so far has awarded payouts of more than 50,000 euros in 143 cases and more than 100,000 euros in 24 cases, dpa reported.

A church-commissioned report in 2018 concluded that at least 3,677 people were abused by clergy in Germany between 1946 and 2014. More than half of the victims were 13 or younger when the abuse took place, and nearly a third of them were altar boys. In recent years, a string of dioceses, including Cologne, have issued further reports on clergy's handling of abuse cases.

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Cologne is a historic center of Catholicism in Germany: the archdiocese has more Catholics than any other in the country, about 1.8 million.

A group representing victims, Eckiger Tisch, said that June 13's decision — 13 years after the abuse scandal first hit the church in Germany — was the first such ruling by a German court.

"This is an important signal for thousands of similar cases in Germany," its spokesman, Matthias Katsch, said in a statement. "The church is liable for the crimes of its priests, bishops and superiors of orders."

Katsch noted that the guidelines for the church's voluntary compensation system fell short of a recommendation presented to bishops by an independent working group for payments ranging to up to 400,000 euros per person. He renewed a call for "appropriate compensation" and said his group would advise victims to press their demands in court.

The archdiocese's representatives declined immediate comment on the ruling, dpa reported.