

GERMANY

Woelki targeted by media, bishops and now the police

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

30_06_2023



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"This could be the first day of the end of Woelki". This statement, uttered by the North Rhine-Westphalia **public television** correspondent, well describe the toxic atmosphere around the cardinal whom Francis chose as successor to Joachim Meisner.

Woelki has been under attack for almost three years, ever since he decided to block, on the grounds of methodological shortcomings, the publication of an investigation into abuse cases in the archdiocese of Cologne, initially commissioned from a Munich law firm, only to later release the results of a new report commissioned from another team of lawyers. After the media onslaught and that of his fellow bishops hostile to him for ideological reasons, yesterday the German justice system stepped in to aggravate the prelate's situation: in the morning, the police showed up at the gates of the archbishopric to conduct a search ordered by the Cologne public prosecutor's office as part of an investigation into Woelki for perjury..

There was a camera capturing the moment the investigators entered the building. The archbishop himself, in shirtsleeves, opened the gates and was later filmed in the courtyard consulting with someone on the phone. There was also a press conference by the public prosecutor Ulf Willuhn, who confirmed that the searches are linked to the criminal investigation into the cardinal initiated in connection with statements made under oath at the District Court in Cologne. The archbishop is suspected of having lied to the competent authority about when he became aware of reports of the alleged abuse of vulnerable people by a priest of the archdiocese.

Yesterday morning, in addition to the archbishopric, German investigators swooped on five other diocesan premises between Cologne, Kassel and Lohfelden in search of a letter the cardinal allegedly sent in 2018 to the Cardinal Prefect of the then Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which allegedly shows that the allegations against the high prelate were already known to him before June 2022, the date when, in his court testimony, he claimed he discovered the file

The clink of handcuffs on Woelki's cardinalate seems to have galvanised his many enemies, who are again demanding his resignation. Their hope is that the Pope, faced with the media clamour provoked by yesterday's searches, will decide to accept the archbishop's resignation already signed last March and hitherto neither accepted nor refused. Should he be found guilty, Woelki would risk up to a year's imprisonment for violation of Article 156 of the German penal code.

After the arrest of Cardinal George Pell, who was forced to spend 444 days as an innocent man in a maximum-security penitentiary

in Australia, seeing another prince of the Church thrown behind bars in dubious circumstances and with the pressing presence of television cameras would come as little surprise. Perhaps there would be no shortage of applause from the other German bishops who in recent years have shown their hostility to Woelki for his resistance to the German Synodal process.

A prospect that brings to mind the dramatic prophecy of Cardinal Francis

Eugene George, former archbishop of Chicago: “I expect to die in a bed, but my successor will die in prison, and his successor will die a martyr in a public square”. And since George's death in bed in his archdiocesan residence, eight years have passed.