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More German Catholics Quit Church Over Sex Abuse

By REUTERS

BERLIN (Reuters) - Some 180,000 Germans left the Catholic Church in 2010, a 40 percent jump over the previous year, as allegations that priests sexually abused children for decades shook the faith, a study said on Thursday.

The number of parishioners quitting the Church surpassed the total of those leaving main Protestant churches for the first time in postwar Germany, the study by the magazine Christ & Welt said. Departures from Protestant churches were stable.

"The rising number of people who left the Church in 2010 represents a lack of trust suffered by the Church because of abuse cases," Rev. Dominik Schwaderlapp, vicar general of the large Cologne archdiocese, told the magazine.

"It is very painful for us because many people obviously have chosen to leave the Church in protest and disgust over the scandal," he added.

Sex abuse scandals have rocked the Church in Ireland, Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, the United States and other countries over the past year as long-hidden cases came to light and law suits highlighted Church cover-ups.

Official membership has been falling in German Catholic and Protestant churches for years. Figures are readily available because members pay a church tax collected by the state and must declare their departure to local tax authorities.

In predominately Catholic Bavaria, Pope Benedict's home state, departures rose by 70 percent in some dioceses. Those included Eichstaett and Augsburg, where Bishop Walter Mixa served from 1996 until resigning last year in disgrace.

Mixa has been accused of physically abusing minors over several decades, making homosexual advances to seminarians and misusing Church funds. Pope Benedict XVI accepted his resignation bishop of Augsburg in May last year.

CHURCH IN CRISIS

More than 15,000 left the Cologne archdiocese, Germany's largest and richest, in 2010, in line with the national trend.

The Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), the umbrella organization of Protestant churches, said its departures last year totaled about 150,000, similar to 2009.

The liberal lay Catholic group We Are Church said the number of those who have left the German Church are lower than those who have considered leaving.

"The figures ... by no means reflect the full extent of the Church's loss of trust and reputation after the

discovery of decades of abuse," the group said in a statement.

Many people shy away from leaving the Church because they do not want to feel excluded from the faith, We Are Church said. Those who leave cannot be married or buried by a priest.

The German Catholic Church has been thrown into crisis over cases of decades-long abuse alleged against clergy. Top German Catholics, including Pope Benedict, have been accused of turning a blind eye to abuse cases.

More than 300 theologians have urged the Church to review its policies, especially the centuries-old rule that priests must remain celibate, to help avoid sex scandals in future.

Last month, the German Church put forward a plan to compensate sexual abuse victims by its priests, offering up to 5,000 euros to those whose cases are too old to bring to court.

A German victims' group described the plan as "cheap."

(Writing by Eric Kelsey; Editing by Tom Heneghan and Jon Hemming)

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