

German Catholic Church shuts sex abuse hotline after demand dips

- * Number of victims' calls fell after initial flurry in 2010
- * Bishop says Church still wants independent abuse study
- * Average reported cases were over 40 years old

By Tom Heneghan, Religion Editor

Jan 17 (Reuters) - Germany's Roman Catholic Church has shut a national hotline for victims of sexual abuse by priests because demand for it has dropped since the peak of the scandal in 2010, the bishop overseeing the project said on Thursday.

The Church plans to continue studying clerical sex abuse and is in contact with potential research partners after sacking the criminologist it originally hired for an independent report on the issue, Bishop Stephan Ackermann told journalists.

Hotline director Andreas Zimmer said his service was flooded with calls when it opened in March 2010 but they soon fell off and only about a dozen a month were made in the second half of 2012. It handled 8,465 calls in almost three years of operation.

"The hotline closed down at the end of 2012," Ackermann said in Trier, according to his statement distributed by the German Bishops Conference. "For some time, the falling demand no longer justified keeping it open."

Victims can still seek Church counselling through local dioceses, Ackermann said. About 600 victims have filed abuse claims against priests since the scandal broke in January 2010.

The lay movement We Are Church expressed disappointment with the closure and criticised some dioceses for assigning senior officials or local law firms as contact persons for victims rather than trained abuse counsellors as the hotline had.

STUDY CONTINUES

Ackermann said the Church, which was strongly criticised by victims' support groups last week when it sacked criminologist Christian Pfeiffer, still wanted an independent study of its records to find patterns of abuse and ways to prevent it.

Pfeiffer accused the bishops of wanting to censor any results he found despite initial assurances of his independence, a charge the Church rejected.

The uproar over firing Pfeiffer "meant a bitter setback for all of us in our efforts to appraise and prevent abuse and win back credibility," Ackermann said.

He said other researchers had already signalled their interest in working on the project "despite all the prophecies of doom in the past few days" from critics saying no academic would now be willing to work with the Church. Ackermann said the fact the Church published the final report on the hotline with "results that cannot be whitewashed" showed it was committed to clearing up the issue.

DETAILS FROM HOTLINE REPORT

Zimmer said in his statement that two-thirds of calls to the hotline came from self-identified victims of sexual abuse.

The cases were on average over 40 years old, which Zimmer said showed "how effectively the perpetrators could hush up the children and how long it takes to break through this silence".

Most abusers clearly planned their acts, preying on youths struggling with their own sexual development, school problems or tragedies such as the death of a parent, he said in his report.

More than three-quarters of priests and brothers of religious orders reported as predators had abused boys, the report said. Religious orders run many Catholic schools and boarding schools.

Among abusive priests in parishes, almost three-fifths of their victims were male, Zimmer's report showed.
(Editing by Louise Ireland)

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