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Scandals prompt exodus from Catholic church in Germany

Niels Sorrells Religion News Service | Dec. 22, 2010

Hikers walk in front of the Wetterstein mountains next to a cross on Wank mountain near Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany, Aug. 18. (CNS photo/Michaela Rehle, Reuters)

BERLIN -- Beset by a series of sex abuse and financial scandals, the Catholic Church in Germany is seeing membership plunge as 2010 comes to a close, according to a series of surveys conducted by German media outlets.

The results released did not include an overall nationwide tally, but based on figures for individual dioceses, tens of thousands of Catholics have opted to officially leave the church over the course of the year.

The departures are not just a matter of filling church pews, but also coffers, since people who officially separate from the church are no longer required to pay a church tax automatically withdrawn from their salary.

According to the data gathered by the German Press Agency dpa and the newspaper Frankfurter Rundschau, the diocese of Augsburg was one of the hardest hit, with 11,351 departures in 2010, up from 6,953 in 2009.

The Augsburg diocese was at the center of a dispute over a bishop who fought to hold on to his job after allegations that he had hit orphans and misused church funds.

Questions were also raised about whether Pope Benedict XVI, while still a cardinal in Munich, adequately policed known abusers in his archdiocese.

Other dioceses seeing big departures were Rottenburg-Stuttgart, with 17,169 departures (up from 10,619 last year) and Wuerzburg, with 5,484 departures (compared to 3,788 in 2009).

?Every single departure hurts and is one too many,? Wuerzburg Bishop Friedhelm Hofmann told dpa, even as he expressed hope others might eventually return.

Catholic leaders had already seen indications that 2010 could be the continuation of a bad trend. Figures released last spring by the German Conference of Bishops showed 125,585 departures in 2009, up from 121,155 in 2008. However, both those figures remain below a big spike in 1992 of 192,766 departures.

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