

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

April 12, 2011 at 12:14pm

Germans leaving Catholic Church in droves

by Niels Sorrells by Religion News Service

BERLIN -- The number of Germans leaving the Roman Catholic Church rose dramatically in 2010 as Pope Benedict XVI's homeland wrestled with reports of systematic sexual abuse of minors and attempted cover-ups, according to a study by a German newspaper.

About 180,000 Catholics officially ended their church affiliation in 2010, a rise of 50,000 (or 40 percent) from 2009, according to the weekly *Die Zeit* newspaper.

The data was collected from surveys answered by most of Germany's major dioceses. Official church-collected data is not expected until the summer.

The release of 2009 defections almost a year ago had already signaled a growing wave of departures even before the scandal fully erupted last year as several officials at church-run schools were accused of abusing children.

"The increase of church departures in 2010 represents a loss of trust that fell especially hard on the church because of the abuse cases," said Dominik Schwaderlappe, the general vicar of Cologne. "This is painful for us, because it clearly shows that people are using church departures as their personal form of protest and as a way to show their disgust with the scandal."

Leaving the church not only means a drop in attendance but also a formal severing of relations; people who formally leave a church are no longer required to have part of their income diverted to the church as church tax.

If the figures are validated, it would represent the first time since World War II that more Catholics than Protestants left their church in a single year.

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