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German Catholic bishops sack sex abuse study head

By Tom Heneghan, Religion Editor

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(Reuters) - Germany's Roman Catholic bishops sacked a criminologist studying sexual abuse of minors by their priests on Wednesday, prompting him to accuse them of trying to censor what was to be a major report on the scandals.

The independent study, examining church files sometimes dating back to 1945, was meant to shed light on undiscovered cases of abuse after about 600 people filed claims against molesting priests in 2010 following a wave of revelations there.

The German scandals were part of a series of abuse scandals that also shook the Catholic Church in Ireland, Belgium and the Netherlands and forced Pope Benedict to issue a public apology.

Bishop Stephan Ackermann, spokesman on abuse issues for the German Bishops Conference, said the hierarchy had lost confidence in the researcher, criminologist Christian Pfeiffer, and would look for another specialist to take up the study.

"We regret that this project ... cannot be continued and we will have to find a new partner," Ackermann said in a statement that blamed Pfeiffer's "communications behaviour with church officials" for the breakdown.

Pfeiffer told German Radio the bishops wanted to change previously agreed guidelines for the project to include a final veto over publishing its results, which he could not accept.

"Everything was settled reasonably and then suddenly came ... an attempt to turn the whole contract towards censorship and stronger control by the church," said Pfeiffer, head of the Lower Saxony Criminological Research Institute.

"DEVASTATING SIGNAL"

The critical lay Catholic movement We Are Church called the decision "a devastating signal for the credibility of the church leadership" that showed the bishops could not accept an independent inquiry into the scandals.

The mainstream Central Committee of German Catholics expressed regret that the study "cannot be carried out in the agreed way" and said any new study should be up to the standards of independent academic research.

In Germany, some 180,000 Catholics left the church in protest in 2010, a 40 percent jump over the previous year, after revelations about abuse in boarding schools prompted about 600 people to file accusations of abuse against priests.

Similar probes into the records of priests accused of molesting children have been conducted in recent years in Ireland, Belgium and the Netherlands, sometimes with devastating results for the reputation of the church

involved.

Ireland was deeply shocked when several inquiries conducted by the government revealed widespread abuse and a pattern of secrecy to cover them up. Three bishops resigned as a result.

An official Dutch report said up to 20,000 children had been sexually abused in Catholic orphanages, boarding schools and seminaries between 1945 and 2010. Some 1,975 people filed complaints as victims.

A commission set up by the Belgian church received 475 reports of abuse before its premises were raided in 2010 by police seeking evidence for possible criminal cases against predator priests. It reported 13 victims were driven to suicide.

Revelations of sexual abuse cases in the United States starting in the 1990s led to a wave of court cases there costing the church \$2 billion in settlements and a few diocesan bankruptcies.

CLASH OVER CONTRACT

Speaking to German Radio, Ackermann accused Pfeiffer of reinterpreting his research contract and said the bishops had tried to clarify some points in the agreement because they feared he would publish results without their permission.

"We weren't trying to hold things back," he said. "We want a similar project to go ahead and we will look for a new partner."

Ackermann noted that another researcher had produced a parallel report into the abuse crisis without any problem.

That study, which concluded most priests accused of sexual abuse were psychologically normal, was lambasted as a whitewash by victims' support groups.

Pfeiffer also said he found out after starting his study, which was supposed to study files for nine dioceses since 1945 and 18 dioceses for the period 2000 to 2010, that files on priests convicted of sexual abuse could be destroyed 10 years after the verdict.

He said his team of researchers would continue its work without church support, appealing to victims to report their cases to them so they can produce a report on their experiences.

(Reporting By Tom Heneghan; Editing by Jon Boyle)

<http://in.reuters.com/article/2013/01/09/germany-catholic-abuse-idINDEE9080C220130109>

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