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The Cologne Cathedral is seen at the end of an empty street in Cologne Germany, Wednesday, Dec. 16, 2020. Germany has entered a harder lockdown, closing shops and schools in an effort to bring down stubbornly high new cases of the coronavirus. Another 400,000 people formally left the Catholic Church in Germany last year, though the number was down from a record set in 2022 as church leaders struggle to put a long-running scandal over abuse by clergy behind them and tackle calls for reform, official figures showed Thursday, June 27, 2024. (AP/Martin Meissner, File)

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Another 400,000 people formally left the Catholic Church in Germany last year, though the number was down from a [record set in 2022](#) as church leaders struggle to put a long-running scandal over abuse by clergy behind them and tackle calls for reform, official figures showed Thursday.

The German Bishops' Conference said that 402,694 people left the church in 2023. That was down from 522,821 the previous year, but still the second-highest figure so far. At the same time, 1,559 people joined the church and another 4,127 rejoined.

In Germany, people who are formally members of a church pay a so-called church tax that helps finance it in addition to the regular taxes the rest of the population pays. If they register their departure with local authorities, they no longer have to pay that. There are some exemptions for low earners, jobless, retirees, students and others.

The country's Catholic Church had around 20.35 million members at the end of last year. In an annual summary of statistics, the bishops' conference didn't detail reasons for the departures.

But many people have turned their backs on the church in recent years amid fallout from the [scandal over abuse](#) by clergy and others. In response to that crisis, German bishops and an influential lay organization led a three-year reform process, the "Synodal Path," which was marked by tensions between liberalizers and conservatives and drew open opposition from the Vatican. Its [final assembly](#) last year called for the church to [approve blessings](#) of same-sex unions.

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A follow-up process also has been marked by tension with the Vatican, though it did get underway this year after Rome [initially insisted](#) that German bishops scrap a vote on the statutes of a committee that is supposed to pave the way for a future decision-making council bringing together bishops and laypeople.

“The figures are alarming. They show that the church is in a wide-ranging crisis,” said the head of the bishops' conference, Limburg Bishop Georg Bätzing, whose diocese last year saw 13,000 people leave the church — 2,000 fewer than a year earlier.

“Reforms alone will not solve the church crisis, but the crisis will get worse without reforms. And so changes are necessary,” Bätzing said in comments posted on the Limburg diocese's website.

Christians in Germany are roughly evenly split between Catholics and Protestants, and it's not just the Catholic Church that is losing members. The Protestant Church said in May that it saw about 380,000 formal departures last year, around the same level as 2022, leaving its membership at 18.56 million. It also has grappled with past [abuse cases](#).