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Norway wants \$5.1m from Catholic church for fraud

News 24 (29.06.2015) <http://www.news24.com/World/News/Norway-wants-51m-from-Catholic-church-for-fraud-20150629> - Norway is claiming \$5.1m compensation from the Catholic church for exaggerating membership numbers to obtain more state aid, the Oslo diocese said on Monday.

The diocese, its bishop and the financial officer are suspected of fraudulently registering thousands of people on its membership lists between 2010 and 2014, which enabled it to obtain 50 million kroner (more than \$6.0m) in state subsidies.

Norway's church denies engaging in fraud, but has admitted its past methods were "unsatisfactory".

In Norway, a predominantly Protestant country, the state provides subsidies to organised religions, the size of which is determined by the number of members.

The Dagbladet daily, which first broke the story, said the diocese had received a letter from the administration on Monday calling for the 40.6 million krone overpayment to be refunded.

A spokeswoman for the diocese, Lisa Wade, confirmed the contents of the letter.

She told AFP that the church would not be paying the sum and would take the matter up with the culture ministry.

"We have a very different understanding of the law," she said.

"It's complex. It's not like it's a clear-cut case."

Norway's Roman Catholic minority had 140 000 registered members in 2014, more than double the number in 2010.

To explain the jump, the Church has claimed it benefitted from a large wave of Catholic immigrants, notably Poles, who practised their religion but did not register with the Church, which in turn cost the Church more but did not result in increased state subsidies.

Their names have now been removed from the list. More than 21 000 other cases have yet to be clarified. Police raided the Catholic Church's offices on February 26 on suspicions of "aggravated fraud".

Catholic diocese closed in Oslo

News in English (26.02.2015) - <http://www.newsinenglish.no/2015/02/26/police-raid-catholic-diocese-in-oslo/> - Earlier this week, the county governor (*fylkesmann*) for Oslo and Akershus reported the diocese to the police for allegedly misrepresenting its church membership. Religious denominations are eligible for state funding in Norway based on their membership statistics.

"The venture *Oslo katolske bispedømmet* (OKB) is charged with serious fraud, and the sum is for NOK 50 million that has been illegally claimed in state support," Kristin Rusdal, a prosecutor for the Oslo Police District, told state broadcaster NRK. Rusdal noted that OKB, the Catholic diocese in Oslo, handles the central membership register for the Catholic Church in Norway.

Newspaper *Dagbladet* has reported that the diocese is accused of registering virtually all immigrants to Norway who come from largely Catholic countries as members of the Catholic Church in Norway, without asking them if they wished to join the church. The church is thus suspected of having received millions of kroner in state support based on invalid membership numbers.

NRK reported that the police raided both the offices of the diocese and two private homes, but wouldn't say who owns the homes. *Dagbladet* reported that one of the homes is believed to belong to Eidsvig, who serves as bishop of the Catholic Church for the entire country. "We are searching for documents that can provide a foundation for the claims against the church in this case," Rusdal said. "I can't say anything more concrete."

She said that 12 police investigators arrived unannounced at the diocese Thursday morning. "Our people were allowed in and those who were there cooperated well with the police," she said. Among them was Gunhild Ficarra, a secretary for the diocese who told NRK "this is no fun at all."

Bishop has denied intentional deceit

Dagbladet has reported that Eidsvig was made aware in 2012 that the church was registering immigrants as members of the church without their knowledge. In 2013, the bishop's council voted to phase out the practice but it nonetheless continued. Eidsvig told *Dagbladet* earlier this week that there was no intention to manipulate membership numbers and he doesn't think the diocese is criminally liable.

"The question is whether there was an intention, I think, to register people who are not Catholics," Eidsvig told *Dagbladet*. "We have never tried to do that." He conceded there was "no doubt" the church had registered people who were not Catholics, "but I don't think you'll find a clean register in any church community, not that that's any excuse."

Dagbladet obtained a copy of an email sent to the county governor by a whistleblower within the church, raising concerns about how church membership was being handled by the diocese leadership. The church has earlier admitted that it registered thousands of immigrants based on their nationality, without the immigrants knowing they'd been listed as members of the diocese.

Lars Holo, a lawyer for the diocese, was on holiday abroad and said he couldn't comment on the expanded charges against Bishop Eidsvig. He told NRK, however, that he was surprised by the charges since they come "while the diocese is in the midst of straightening things up and going along with the demands from the county governor, and before the deadline for meeting them has expired."

Some legislation on religious and belief communities

Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l

HRWF (28.02.2015) - Norway's national statistical agency recently estimated the national population at 5.08 million. About 79 % of the population belongs to the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC).

Various Christian denominations make up 57% of all registered members of non-Lutheran religious groups (about 313,000 registered members). Of these, the Roman Catholic Church is the largest minority. Thanks to recent immigration, it increased from 57,000 in 2010 to an estimated 121,000 registered members in 2013. The Pentecostal Church has approximately 39,400 registered members. Membership in Muslim congregations is about 120,900 and comprises 22 % of all members of religious groups outside of the ELC in the country. Membership in Jewish congregations is about 800. There are two official Jewish congregations, one in Oslo and one in Trondheim.

Buddhists, Orthodox Christians, Sikhs, and Hindus together constitute less than 5 percent of the population.

Immigrants make up the majority of religious groups outside of the ELC. Large immigrant populations from Poland and the Philippines have increased the Catholic population. Immigrants from Muslim countries, including Pakistan and Somalia, have contributed to the growth of Islam, mainly in cities.

Registration of faith communities

The registration procedure of faith or belief communities is part of the **Act relating to faith communities and others** issued on 13th June 1969.

Relations between official authorities and faith or belief communities take place through regional officials, here called the County Governor (i.e. *Fylkesmann*; there are 19 *fylke*, or regions, a territorial and administrative entity between state and municipality).

The community registers with the County Governor (section 14) and provides the following information:

- Complete name and address of the community
- Basic creed and doctrine
- Information about the organisation, activities and membership
- Names of board members (if there is such)
- Name and sphere of responsibility of each spiritual and administrative leader.

Denominations with congregations in various regions (*fylke*) either register as one entity under one name or let their congregations register separately.

Some communities choose to have one central registration, e.g the Roman Catholic Church or the Methodist Church, whereas others let each local congregation take care of their own registration—two examples being the Muslim communities and the Pentecostal congregations.

Every year before 1st March the faith or belief community is required to send a short written note to the County Governor on its activities during the last calendar year (Section 16). The community is also to notify the authority if there are any changes within the community as regards doctrine or leadership.

Non-registered communities cannot apply for the right to perform wedding ceremonies.

Governmental funding

Any faith or belief community, whether registered or unregistered, has the right to receive governmental grants, but must apply for these to the County Governor each year before 1st April. The written application must state the number of members in the community on 1st January of the same year. The Norwegian Humanist Association is also funded by the state.

The amount given to faith or belief communities depends on their membership and is calculated by the Department of Justice every year, using government funds allocated to the state church and its membership as its basis. The amount per member is the same for all communities. The amounts are channelled to the faith communities according of the type of registration they have chosen: either to the central entity (i.e. Methodist congregations) or to the local entities registered separately (i.e. Muslim and Pentecostal communities).

The state grant must be used for "religious purposes". The communities must record their expenses and submit an accounting to the County Governor each year before 1st March. The community board or a registered accountant must sign the account.

Both registered and non-registered communities can apply for state grants, and both have to provide the same information. The main difference between the two categories is that non-registered communities do not have to submit extensive reports to authorities every year.
