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With decline in participation, Brussels archdiocese to close churches

by Jonathan Luxmoore by Catholic News Service

Oxford, England — Belgium's Mechelen-Brussels archdiocese has become Europe's latest to plan church closures in the face of declining Catholic participation.

An archdiocesan official told the German Catholic news agency KNA that "dozens of churches" faced closing and that the city's largest Catholic landmark, St. Catherine Church, was expected to be turned into a fruit and vegetable market.

However, the archdiocesan spokesman, Jesuit Fr. Tommy Scholtes, told Catholic News Service on Wednesday that final decisions on which of the Brussels deanery's 108 churches to decommission would take account of maintenance costs, but also reflect community needs.

He said it was "not just a question of closing them, but also of knowing what to do with the communities attached to them. All of this is being discussed with the city authorities."

The Mechelen-Brussels archdiocese, which since February 2010 has been headed by Archbishop Andre Leonard, covers the Belgian capital and province of Brabant.

The planned church closures follow a fall in practicing Catholics to around 1.5 percent of the city population, with average Sunday Mass attendance of around 100 people per parish, according to a 2010 survey from the University of Leuven.

Similar moves were announced in late 2012 by the Catholic archdioceses of Berlin and Vienna, in the face of dwindling congregations.

Msgr. Tony Frison, an archdiocesan official, told KNA the 19th-century St. Catherine Church, whose closure was announced in November 2011, was "filled with many emotions" for local people. He said the archdiocese still hoped it could be converted into a meditation center rather than an indoor market.

Scholtes said the church could also be handed over to Brussels' Romanian Orthodox community, which regularly attracts more 250 people to services.

He added that priests from Africa and Poland had helped local parishes survive, raising hopes that some could continue to function.

"The church is in discussion with the local authorities on the likely restoration costs of churches like St. Catherine's -- if the city could contribute, and if there were enough Catholics attending, it might still be saved," the spokesman said.

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