

Belgian football club declines Catholic shirt deal as 'too sensitive'

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Utrecht, Netherlands, December 9 (ENInews)--A football club in Belgium's top division has declined the offer of a sponsorship deal from a leading Roman Catholic newspaper, for fear of attracting ridicule, Belgian media report.

The revelation coincides with news that the Vatican is examining the case of a former Belgian bishop, who resigned in April after admitting to sexually abusing a family member.

The weekly Kerk&Leven (Church&Life), which claims about one million readers in Flanders, the country's Dutch-speaking region, approached Cercle Brugge with the sponsorship offer in May.

Cercle Brugge is one of two top division football clubs in Bruges, a city in the northwest of Belgium. The decision by the club to decline the sponsorship offer meant the club missing out on income of approximately 50 000 euro (US\$66 000).

In keeping with an annual tradition, the club announced it will promote the CliniClowns, a national charity that deploys clowns to entertain hospitalised children. Last year, Cercle Brugge promoted the Catholic development aid agency Caritas International.

The sponsorship offer was made in "a spontaneous contact between Kerk&Leven and our club", Cercle Brugge's commercial director Marc Tanghe told the Belgian daily newspaper Het Nieuwsblad. "They wanted their name on our shorts or underneath the shirt number and offered a very nice deal.

"But given all the scandals in the Catholic Church, especially concerning Bishop Roger Vangheluwe in Bruges, we thought it to be too sensitive," said Tanghe. "We feared becoming a target of ridicule. Moreover, we also thought that it is not appropriate for us as a football club to be associated with a particular way of looking

at life.

"Some members of our board would have gladly accepted the financial input. However, Cercle also has supporters who belong to other religions," he said.

"We had to think long and hard about it," Cercle Brugge chairman Frans Schotte told Het Nieuwsblad. "For at least a section of our players, supporters and sponsors, it would have been very difficult to identify with the religious message that would have featured on our shirt.

Cercle Brugge's decision avoided a clash with the Belgian football association, KBVB. "The rules are clear: in no way may shirt advertising be of a political or religious nature," said spokesperson Nicolas Cornu of the KBVB.

Pope Benedict XVI asked the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith several weeks ago "to look into" the case of the former bishop of Bruges, Vatican spokesperson, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, told the news agency AFP on 3 December.

The Pope accepted Vangheluwe's resignation on 23 April, after he admitted to sexually abusing his nephew between 1973 and 1986. Vangheluwe was Belgium's longest-serving Catholic bishop, and was set to retire at the end of 2011.

There are over seven million Catholics in Belgium, about three quarters of the total population. However, Sunday church attendance is said to be below 10 percent.