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Cardinal: JP II OK'd letter on shielding priest abuser

John Thavis Catholic News Service | Apr. 19, 2010

VATICAN CITY -- A retired Vatican cardinal said the late Pope John Paul II had approved his congratulatory letter to a French bishop who refused to report a sexually abusive priest to police.

Spanish newspapers reported that Colombian Cardinal Dario Castrillon Hoyos told an audience at a Catholic university in Murcia, Spain, April 16 that he consulted with Pope John Paul and showed him the letter. He said the pope had authorized him to send the letter to bishops worldwide.

Cardinal Castrillon's letter resurfaced recently in the coverage of recent disclosures of sexual abuse by priests. He wrote it in 2001, when he was head of the Vatican's Congregation for Clergy.

"I congratulate you for not denouncing a priest to the civil administration," Cardinal Castrillon wrote to Bishop Pierre Pican of Bayeux-Lisieux. "You have acted well and I am happy to have a colleague in the episcopate who, in the eyes of history and of all other bishops in the world, preferred prison to denouncing his son, a priest."

The priest was later sentenced to 18 years in prison for multiple counts of sexual assault. The bishop was given a three-month suspended sentence for not reporting the abuse in violation of French law.

The Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, said April 15 that Cardinal Castrillon's letter "is a confirmation of how opportune it was to centralize the handling of cases of sex abuse of minors by clergy under the competence of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in order to assure their rigorous and coherent management."

Cardinal Castrillon retired from his Vatican position in 2006. His replacement, Brazilian Cardinal Claudio Hummes, has said instances of priestly sexual abuse need to be brought to the attention of the civil justice system and not just to church authorities.

The Vatican has recently emphasized that under a policy put in place in 2001-2002, bishops are expected to comply with all civil laws that mandate reporting of sex abuse allegations and to cooperate in civil investigations.

Where laws do not mandate reporting to police, bishops are expected to encourage victims to exercise their rights to report the crimes, Vatican officials said.

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