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Belgium cardinal tried to keep abuse victim quiet

NCR Staff | Aug. 30, 2010

Cardinal Godfried Danneels (CNS 2007 file photo)

BRUSSELS, BELGIUM -- Audio recordings leaked to the Belgian media this weekend reveal Belgium's Cardinal Godfried Danneels urging a sex abuse victim not to make public that his abuser was his uncle Bishop Roger Vangheluwe of Bruges, Belgium. The recordings show Danneels pressuring the young man not to force Vangheluwe to resign.

Vangheluwe eventually did resign April 23. He had served as bishop of Bruges for more than 25 years and was 73 years old.

A spokesman for Danneels told NCR that the cardinal did not comment about his meeting with the nephew and Vangheluwe, during an earlier press conference, because "he assumed that it was a confidential conversation to be kept within the family."

The spokesman said that Danneels "acted out of concern for the anonymity of the victim and now regrets that the conversation he considered confidential has been made public."

Danneels's spokesman told Catholic News Service correspondent Jonathan Luxmoore that news reports on the recorded meeting have been interpreted out of context.

"There was no intention of any cover-up," Toon Osaer, spokesman for the cardinal, who retired in January as archbishop of Mechelen-Brussels, told Catholic News Service Aug. 30.

NCR contributor John A. Dick, an academic in Belgium, provided the following translation of the audio transcripts published by *De Standaard* newspaper.

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The first conversation between Danneels and Vangheluwue's nephew was held April 8 this year.

Nephew: "So... I was sexually abused by my uncle Roger thrughout my entire youth. Sexually and even now psychologically. I think I have to do something about this, that I have a responsibility to report this to a higher

authority."

Nephew speaking again to Danneels: "This is your responsibility. I can't make the decision. I have carried this burden on my shoulders long enough and now you must carry it. That's what I mean."

Danneels: "Actually the bishop [e.g. Vangheluwe] will retire next year. I think it would be better that you wait until then."

The nephew replies that he cannot accept the fact that Bishop Vangheluwe would retire honorably. Danneels replies that he personally "has no authority over Bishop Vangheluwe." To which the nephew asks "Well then who?" "The pope" is the reply.

Cardinal Danneels asks if the nephew wants Vangheluwe to resign and adds: "But that is his decision. I can mention it but that's all. You expect me to do something that I cannot do. I don't know what more to do. Or perhaps I have to find some other way to bring this to a satisfactory conclusion."

When the nephew stresses that the cardinal must speak to pope and that Vangeluwe must be sanctioned by the church, Cardinal Danneels responds "Yes but...You can also ask forgiveness and, well, you can also acknowledge your own guilt."

Nephew: "Whose forgiveness do I have to seek? I am not the one to ask for forgiveness."

Danneels: "He can do that. That's correct."

Later Cardinal Danneels asks that the conversation not be made public and suggests to the nephew: "You can figure that he will resign next year and that he agrees to make no more appearances on television, that sort of thing,; and before you know it a year has gone by."

Nephew: "No! I am putting this in your hands and the two of you have to make a decision."

"So you can grab us and try to blackmail us, huh, and say: 'you have to do something!'" is the reaction.

Toward the end of this conversation, the nephew asks "Why do you have so much compassion for him [Vangheluwe] and not for me?"
Dannels: "That's not what I am saying."

Nephew: "You are always trying to defend him. I thought I would get some support from you. Instead I sit here trying to defend myself about things which are not my doing."

Danneels: "No ... I am not saying that but that there is something else that has to be done."

Nephew: "And exactly what is that?"

Danneels: "Seek forgiveness in any case."

In this second conversation, Vangheluwe and family members of the abused nephew are also present:

Vangheluwe acknowledges that he had sexually abused his nephew.

Danneels: "Well ... are you sorry? Do you ask forgiveness?"

Vangheluwe: "I am awfully sorry. And I have asked ____ for forgiveness. I know what I am asking is very difficult. But I do ask very sincerely. Can you ever forgive me? ... I cannt forgive my own self. I am deeply sorry I have ruined so many lives."

Family member: "Well yes ... my, those are serious things. Arent't they Roger? My, my you have to acklowledge that this is no normal kind of thing. I think you have to very clearely acknowledge that. This is no little thing. This is a very serious offense and you have to personally acknowledge that!"

Family member to Vangheluwe: "You have torn apart our entire family."

Vangheluwe: "Yes I have ruined the enture family. It's terrible."

Danneels to Vangheluwe and to the nephew: "Yes. Very painful. So now what do you think?"

The discussion goes on but Vangheluwe will not agree that he must resign.

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Dick also sent to NCR, this timeline of events

An unnamed member of the victim's family sent an e-mail in March 2010 to the Diocese of Bruges informing the chancery that Bishop Vangheluwe had sexually abused his nephew in the 1970s and 1980s and stated that Vangheluwe had to resign at once. Shortly thereafter came the April 8 meeting with the nephew, some members of the nephew's family and Vangheluwe and Danneels. During that meeting the nephew asked his uncle to resign. Unknown to either Vangheluwe or Danneels, this meeting was recorded.

Vangheluwe did not resign after the early April meeting and so the, once again unnamed, family member sent e-mails to diocesan offices at all of the Belgian dioceses, informing the recipients about the sexual abuse by Vangheluwe.

On April 23, Pope Benedict XVI accepted Vangheluwe's resignation, and on April 26, it was reported that Vangheluwe would take refuge in the Belgian Westvleteren Abbey.

According to Dick, there are some particularly ironic elements in this story.

On April 19, Vangheluwe presented a previously scheduled a university lecture and was aksed about how pedophilia should be handled. His eplied: "I think you need to be well informed about these things. In a way, it's not a tougher subject than many others. Yes, it's embarrassing. It's scandalous. But then again, so are many other things. ..."

As late as April 21, Vangheluwe had written a column in the Flemish national Catholic newspaper *Kerk and Leven* (Church and Life) that says: "At present we suffer from the scandals that batter the church. Everywhere there are stories of priests abusing children. It's horrible to see these things surface, and they hurt us deeply. Nevertheless, this shouldn't blind us from the fact that the majority of priests lead exemplary lives ..."

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Danneels's spokesman told Catholic News Service correspondent Jonathan Luxmoore that news reports on the recorded meeting have been interpreted out of context.

"There was no intention of any cover-up," Toon Osaer, spokesman for the cardinal, who retired in January as archbishop of Mechelen-Brussels, told Catholic News Service Aug. 30.

"Seen from today's perspective, the cardinal realizes he was rather naive to think he could help the family in question reach a reconciliation," he said. "At that moment, however, the family didn't want to make public something they'd kept secret for 24 years."

Osaer told CNS that Cardinal Danneels had not kept notes from the "informal private meeting" April 8 and could not verify the transcript's accuracy. He added that he believed the text was "broadly correct" but said the context had been "totally different" than newspapers currently claimed.

"This was a totally confidential meeting, and the family intended to keep it all within the family," the spokesman said. "This is why the cardinal tried to see if a reconciliation was possible. He asked the victim if Vangheluwe should resign immediately, pointing out that we would then have to provide an explanation for his departure. He said if the resignation could be left for another year, it would not be necessary to bring the family's internal affairs into the open."

Osaer told CNS that Cardinal Danneels had offered his advice because the family "disagreed sharply" over the best course of action.

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