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Belgians 'scandalized' by archbishop's remarks

Jonathan Luxmoore Catholic News Service | Jan. 3, 2011

Archbishop Andre-Joseph Leonard of Mechelen-Brussels, Belgium (CNS)

OXFORD, England -- A Belgian journalist who serves as spokesman for the nation's cardinal said Catholics in his country were "scandalized" by an archbishop's testimony to a parliamentary commission on sexual abuse by priests. See *NCR*'s earlier story: Archbishop: church not obligated to compensate abuse victims [1].

In response to questions by commission members, Archbishop Andre-Joseph Leonard of Mechelen-Brussels, president of the Belgian bishops' conference, said he feared the consequences of compensating victims, because payments could also be demanded for "unhappy children born via artificial insemination" or facing the "psychological impact" of being raised by same-sex couples.

He also said he favored a "solidarity fund" for abuse victims when courts were unable to establish "direct responsibility" by institutions and said the church would contribute to the fund "in the same way that it already intervenes for victims of natural catastrophes or for the poor."

Toon Osaer, editor of the church's *Kerk en Leven* weekly and spokesman for Cardinal Godfried Danneels, Archbishop Leonard's predecessor, said all nine serving bishops had been asked to testify to the commission, and "each has done in his own name. Archbishop Leonard wasn't representing the Belgian church at that moment, only himself."

However, he added that the "vast majority of people" had been "quite scandalized" by the archbishop's manner of speaking, especially in response to questions at the Dec. 22 hearing.

He told Catholic News Service Dec. 30 that Archbishop Leonard had been concerned that victims should seek initial redress via the justice system before expecting payments from the church.

"His point was that the people who committed offenses should first be investigated and brought to court -- only then, if the courts won't provide satisfactory compensation, should the church see what it can do for them," Osaer said.

"As in all such cases, some people have supported and some have opposed him, so the bishops will be meeting

[this] week to discuss further steps, as well as to set out the agenda for a new church center for recognition, healing and reconciliation," he said.

Osaer said some critical reactions to Archbishop Leonard's remarks were political.

"There's a political game being played out in this commission, which has to submit its findings by April 2011," the editor said. "It's too early to say whether what the archbishop had said will have a direct practical impact on the church's life here."

Belgium's Catholic Church, like the church in other European countries, has been rocked by allegations of abuse throughout 2010.

In a May pastoral letter, the bishops' conference asked forgiveness from victims and promised to curb further abuse, after Bishop Roger Vangheluwe of Brugge resigned following an admission he had molested his nephew.

In June, police investigating alleged clergy sexual abuse raided the bishops' conference headquarters and searched Cardinal Danneels' residence. Bishops gathered for a scheduled meeting at the headquarters had been surprised by police, who then confiscated documents and cell phones of all present.

In September, the conference pledged to "learn lessons" from a report drawn up by a commission under Peter Adriaenssens. The report recounted 475 cases of molestation in Catholic dioceses, religious orders and boarding schools, including 13 cases in which victims had committed suicide.

Belgian newspapers said that, in September alone, Justice Ministry officials had received more than 100 new accusations of abuse by Catholic priests, mostly involving male victims now ages 23-82.

In a midnight Mass homily on Christmas, Archbishop Leonard said that "abuses of power and acts of violence" by priests were "particularly sordid," and he was grateful to victims who "had the courage" to come forward.

"The victims can and must always address themselves as a matter of priority to the civil justice system," the archbishop added. "For its part, the church will continue the mission proper to it -- of knowing how to listen, within its pastoral plan, to persons who wish to be heard in their suffering, but without ever deterring them from reporting to civil justice."

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