

Vatican: Disgraced Belgian bishop to leave

Sarah Delaney Catholic News Service | Apr. 11, 2011

VATICAN CITY -- The Vatican ordered a Belgian bishop who admitted to sexually abusing his nephew to leave his country and undergo "spiritual and psychological treatment," Vatican Radio reported.

Citing a statement from the Vatican nuncio in Belgium, the radio report April 10 said that former Brugge Bishop Roger Vangheluwe, 74, had already left the country, although his whereabouts were not divulged.

The statement said the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican agency that handles clerical sex abuse cases, "has decided that, even though the canon law statute of limitations has expired as regards the acts of sexual abuse committed against his nephew, Msgr. Vangheluwe must leave Belgium and begin a period of spiritual and psychological treatment," Vatican Radio reported.

Bishop Vangheluwe "has lived in various places with no fixed address since his resignation, and has already left the country," the statement said.

The action by the doctrinal congregation followed an announcement from the Belgian prosecutor's office that the bishop cannot be prosecuted under Belgian law because of the civil statute of limitations also expired, the radio said.

Bishop Vangheluwe resigned in April 2010 after publicly confessing to the abuse of his nephew, saying "when I was still a simple priest and for a certain time at the beginning of my episcopacy, I sexually abused a young man," who was a minor at the time. The admission came after revelations from the nephew's family.

Bishop Vangheluwe had led the Brugge diocese for more than 25 years.

Belgian police had been investigating claims of clerical sex abuse for years, and the Belgian church had set up a special commission to hear accusations. A month after Bishop Vangheluwe's confession and resignation, the Belgian Bishops' Conference issued a letter seeking forgiveness for past abuse and promising vigorous action to root out the problem.

In June 2010, Belgian police raided the headquarters of the Archdiocese of Mechelen-Brussels during a meeting of the Belgian bishops, forcing them to stay inside all day as authorities searched the premises and sequestered computers and files.

Pope Benedict XVI expressed indignation at the methods used by the police, which reportedly included opening the tombs of two cardinals buried in the cathedral, but he reiterated that accusations of clerical abuse of minors should be investigated by civil authorities as well as by those of the church.

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