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Prelates defend John Paul II on abuse crisis

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 29, 2011 NCR Today

ROME --tWhile victims of clerical abuse in the United States are blasting the beatification of Pope John Paul II for ?rubbing more salt into the wounds? caused by the abuse crisis, two prelates who worked with the late pope, one a Slovakian and another an American, insisted that the crisis does not disqualify John Paul from sainthood.

tA statement released today by the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, the main victims? advocacy group in the United States, asserted that ?in more than 25 years as the most powerful religious figure on the planet, John Paul II did almost nothing to safeguard kids across the world.?

tJohn Paul, according to the SNAP statement, ?ignored or promoted stunningly complicit church officials,? and ?on that basis alone, beatifying John Paul II shouldn?t be considered, much less ?fast-tracked.??

tIn Rome, however, prelates who knew the pope argued that a tight focus on the sexual abuse crisis misses the big picture of what John Paul II was all about.

?If you take his personality as a whole, you?ll have the measure of the man,? said Cardinal Jozef Tomko, who worked in the Vatican under John Paul II in various capacities throughout his entire papacy.

?He was so clear, so transparent, and so honest,? Tomko said.

John Paul II found revelations of priestly abuse ?deplorable and painful,? said Archbishop John Nienstedt of St. Paul-Minneapolis, who worked in the Vatican?s Secretariat of State during the John Paul years from 1980 to 1985.

?When he spoke to the American bishops, he said there?s no room in the priesthood for someone who commits abuse,? Nienstedt said. ?I think that was a very clear statement.?

Tomko spoke in an interview with CNN, while Nienstedt sat down for an interview with NCR. Both men will take part in the beatification Mass in St. Peter?s Square on Sunday.

Media reports have identified Tomko as the figure who initiated a petition among the cardinals after the death of John Paul II asking the next pope, whoever it might be, to waive the normal five-year waiting period to initiate a sainthood cause.

Asked about those reports, Tomko responded: ?I don?t confirm or deny [that it?s true].?

Both prelates conceded that the handling of the sexual abuse crisis during the John Paul years was flawed.

?He was not infallible in the whole of his life and in each action, or each idea he had,? Tomko said.

?Is it possible that he trusted some persons because he wasn?t aware of their faults, or wasn?t convinced of their sins? It?s quite possible he was wrong in that, but at that time it was his conviction,? Tomko said.

Nienstedt said John Paul?s faith in ?the goodness of people? made the sexual crisis ?very hard for him to understand.?

The Vatican response suffered initially, Nienstedt said, because officials were ?much further away, getting information filtered through the media and also reports from their nuncios,? meaning the papal ambassadors in various nations.

Yet to suggest that John Paul II willfully turned a blind eye, Nienstedt said, is a ?misreading.?

tBoth Tomko and Nienstedt said that in the long run, other feature of John Paul?s life and legacy will loom larger than his record on the crisis.

tJohn Paul was a man of ?deep faith,? Tomko said, something even people outside the church could see. While he was the pope to Catholics, Tomko said, for people of other faiths and none, he was what the Orthodox refer to as a *starets* ? a wise, older holy man.

t?We knew him,? Tomko said. ?If you have ever known a saintly person, you just know it.?

tNienstedt said John Paul II was driven by ?a deep love of God, and a deep love of people,? calling those ?the two mainstays of his life.?

tOver time, Nienstedt said, aspects of John Paul?s legacy such as the ?zealous apostolic spirit? expressed in his travels, his writings, and the spirit of forgiveness he demonstrated when he embraced the man who tried to kill him in 1981, Mehmet Ali A?ca, are what will stand out.

tTomko expressed great satisfaction at seeing John Paul II beatified.

t?He was my friend,? the 87-year-old Tomko said. ?It?s good to have friends in Heaven.?

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