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Walking 350 miles, victim asks to meet pope

Cindy Wooden Catholic News Service | Oct. 11, 2011

VATICAN CITY -- Francesco Zanardi walked almost 350 miles to deliver a letter asking Pope Benedict XVI to meet Italian victims of clerical abuse and to work harder to ensure bishops around the world follow Vatican norms for dealing with accusations of abuse.

Zanardi, 41, set off from Savona, Italy, Sept. 22 and walked almost all the way to Rome. He said he was abused by a priest when he was about 10 years old, but by the time he reported it to police in 2007, the statue of limitations had expired.

Although more victims of the same priest came forward in 2010 and police are now investigating, Zanardi said, "this priest is still free. He lives in an apartment owned by the church."

The Italian police who patrol St. Peter's Square stopped Zanardi and Alberto Sala, president of an Italian organization that cares for abused children, Oct. 11 at a checkpoint. The men were unable to deliver Zanardi's letter to the Bronze Doors of the Apostolic Palace, but a Vatican employee accepted the letter.

"All accusations should be investigated and accused priests should be isolated from children during the investigation," Zanardi said.

In addition, he said, "it's important to respond to the victims -- they need an incredible amount of help. It's taken me 20 years to overcome the trauma and that's fast. I wanted to die. Victims feel they are at fault, that they are dirty. They need help."

Zanardi said it isn't right that Pope Benedict has met with victims from the United States, Australia, England and Germany, but not victims from Italy. In fact, he said, while his registered letters have reached the Vatican, he has never had a response from the pope or any Vatican official.

He said in his experience, guidelines issued by the Vatican over the past 10 years to improve child protection and deal with accusations of abuse "are not being applied. They exist only on paper."

In addition to asking for a meeting with the pope and for the application of Vatican norms, Zanardi also wants the Vatican to hand over its files of accusations to legal officials in the countries where abuse is alleged to have taken place.

Bishops are obliged to report to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith accusations against priests that appear well-founded.

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