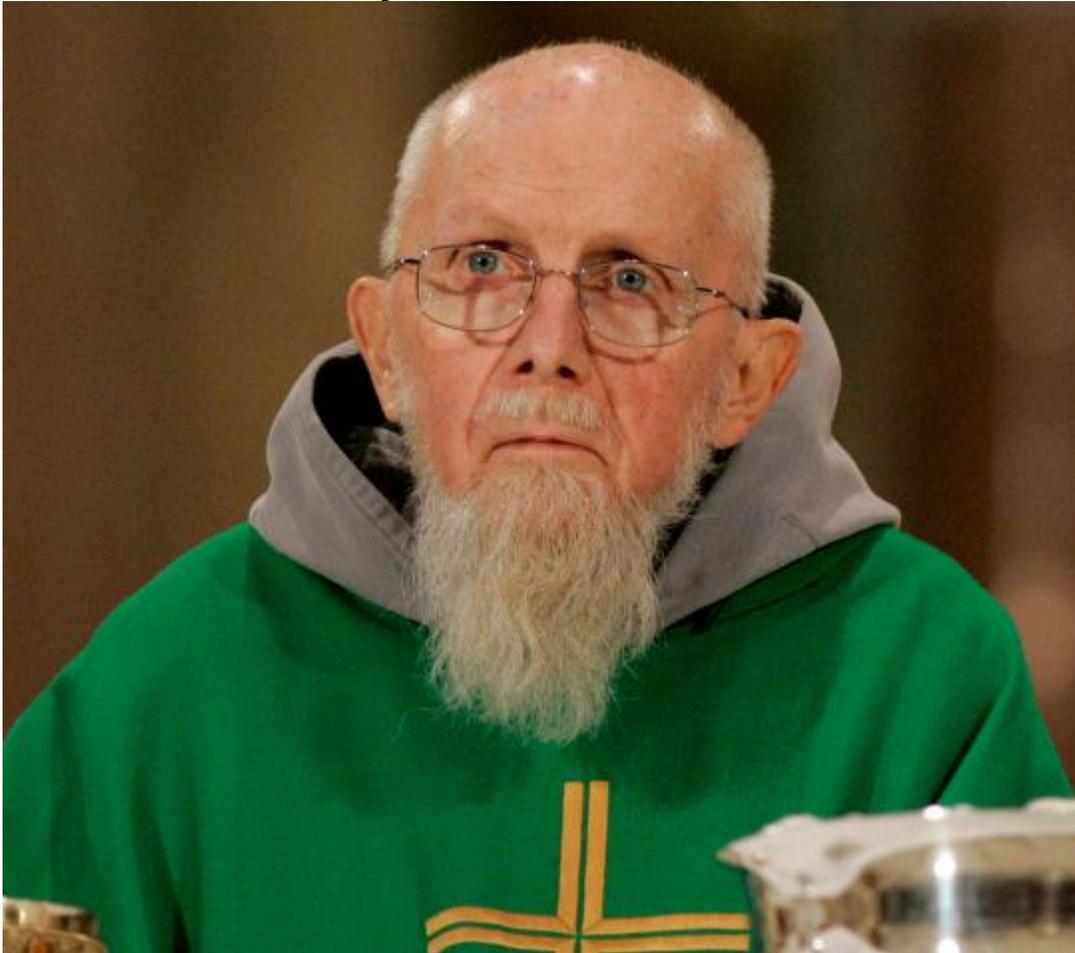


## UPDATE: Priest steps down from TV show after comments on sexual abuse

Catholic News Service | Sep. 5, 2012



Fr. Benedict J. Groeschel, founder of the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal, is pictured celebrating Mass in Washington in this 2006 file photo. (CNS/Nancy Wiechec)

**NEW YORK** -- Fr. Benedict Groeschel, a Franciscan Friar of the Renewal who has long been a popular speaker and television personality, apologized Aug. 30 for interview comments he made that were published online two days earlier, saying that "in a lot of cases" the victim of child sexual abuse is "the seducer."

Groeschel also had said priests who have committed abuse just one time should not go to jail.

In the interview, Groeschel referred to Jerry Sandusky, the former Penn State assistant football coach who was convicted in June on 45 charges relating to the sexual abuse of 10 different boys, as a "poor guy."

"I apologize for my comments. I did not intend to blame the victim," said Groeschel, 78, in an Aug. 30 statement. "A priest -- or anyone else -- who abuses a minor is always wrong and is always responsible. My

mind and my way of expressing myself are not as clear as they used to be."

Eternal Word Television Network announced Monday that Groeschel had decided to step down as host of its "Sunday Night Prime" television show after consulting with EWTN and his religious community.

"Father Benedict has led a life of tremendous compassion and service to others and his spiritual insights have been a great gift to the EWTN family for many years," said Michael P. Warsaw, president and CEO of EWTN Global Catholic Network, in a statement.

"At the same time, we ask our EWTN family to pray for all those who have been affected by this painful situation and in particular those who have been victims of sexual abuse," he added.

Joseph Zwilling, a spokesman for the Archdiocese of New York, said in an Aug. 30 statement before Groeschel's apology that the priest's comments were "simply wrong."

Zwilling added, "Although he is not a priest of the Archdiocese of New York, what Father Groeschel said cannot be allowed to stand unchallenged. The sexual abuse of a minor is a crime, and whoever commits that crime deserves to be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law."

He also took exception to Groeschel's characterization of sexual abuse victims as seducers.

"The harm that was done by these remarks was compounded by the assertion that the victim of abuse is responsible for the abuse, or somehow caused the abuse to occur. This is not only terribly wrong. It is also extremely painful for victims," Zwilling said.

"The Archdiocese of New York completely disassociates itself from these comments," he added. "They do not reflect our beliefs or our practice."

The interview had been posted Aug. 28 on the website of the *National Catholic Register*, which is owned by EWTN; Groeschel has appeared frequently on EWTN over the years. Although the Q-and-A interview was removed from the website, other sites had copied the comments and reposted them.

*National Catholic Register* editor-in-chief Jeanette R. De Melo issued an apology Aug. 30.

"Child sexual abuse is never excusable. The editors of the National Catholic Register apologize for publishing without clarification or challenge Father Benedict Groeschel's comments that seem to suggest that the child is somehow responsible for abuse. Nothing could be further from the truth," she said.

De Melo added, "Our publication of that comment was an editorial mistake, for which we sincerely apologize. Given Father Benedict's stellar history over many years, we released his interview without our usual screening and oversight."

The Franciscan Friars of the Renewal, which Groeschel helped found 25 years ago, also apologized.

"Father Benedict made comments that were inappropriate and untrue," the order said in an Aug. 30 statement. "These comments were completely out of character. He never intended to excuse abuse or implicate the victims."

The order cited Groeschel's worsening health: "In recent months his health, memory and cognitive ability have been failing. He has been in and out of the hospital. Due to his declining health and inability to care for himself, Father Benedict had moved to a location where he could rest and be relieved of his responsibilities. Although these factors do not excuse his comments, they help us understand how such a compassionate man could have said something so wrong, so insensitive and so out of character."

In the interview, Groeschel talked about his work with priests involved in sexual abuse. He said, "Suppose you have a man having a nervous breakdown, and a youngster comes after him. A lot of the cases, the youngster, 14, 15, 16 -- is the seducer."

Asked why this would be the case, Groeschel spoke of "a kid looking for a father and didn't have his own" before he brought up Sandusky. "Here's this poor guy -- Sandusky -- it went on for years. Interesting. Why didn't anyone say anything? Apparently, a number of kids knew about it and didn't break the ice. ... It was a moral failure, scandalous; but they didn't think of it in terms of legal things."

Sentencing guidelines could give Sandusky a prison term of 60 to 448 years.

Groeschel then talked of priests accused of child sexual abuse. "At this point, (when) any priest, any clergyman, any social worker, any teacher, any responsible person in society would become involved in a single sexual act -- not necessarily intercourse -- they're done. And I'm inclined to think, on their first offense, they should not go to jail because their intention was not committing a crime."

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