

Belgian bishops welcome court condemnation of 2010 cathedral raid

Jonathan Luxmoore Catholic News Service | May. 30, 2013
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The Belgian Catholic bishops' conference has welcomed judicial condemnation of a 2010 police raid on the cathedral and residence of Cardinal Godfried Danneels of Mechelen-Brussels.

On Tuesday, Belgium's Court of Cassation condemned the June 24, 2010, raid, during which documents were seized and the tombs of two cardinals were pried open. The raid occurred during a bishops' plenary meeting, and the bishops were held all day as police confiscated cellphones, documents and computers.

In its ruling, which is final under Belgian law, the court said the "legally unjustified" raid was ordered by a judge on the basis of a single witness' testimony. The court ordered the return of all seized material to the church.

"We are satisfied with this definitive judgment," said Jesuit Fr. Tommy Scholtes, spokesman for the Brussels-based bishops' conference. "But the raid's illegality was only one aspect of the many problems we still face, and the church must await further developments."

Scholtes told Catholic News Service on Thursday that the church's advisers would decide on further steps in connection with the "illegal action," but warned the court judgment was unlikely to affect public attitudes toward the church.

Meanwhile, a lawyer representing the church, Fernand Keuleneer, said the ruling confirmed the raid had "irreparably violated the right of those concerned to an equitable process."

"As we argued from the beginning, the court believes the investigating judge was on a fishing expedition," Keuleneer said in a statement Wednesday.

"By arbitrarily seizing such an improbable number of documents, he deliberately attempted to gather proof about supposed offenses without the slightest indication they had taken place. This was breaking the law."

Belgium's Catholic church has been dogged by allegations of abuse since early 2010 alongside parallel claims against the church in the neighboring Netherlands and Germany.

Keuleneer said the bishops would continue "to cooperate with correctly conducted judiciary instructions" on sexual abuse.

The *Le Soir* daily reported Wednesday that "material seized illegally by police cannot now be used for inquiries into possible cover-up attempts by the church."

"This is very hard blow for the civil parties hoping to find evidence in it to incriminate the church's hierarchy," the newspaper said.

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