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Scottish archbishop says cardinal blocked plans for abuse investigation

by Simon Caldwell by Catholic News Service

Manchester, England — A disgraced Scottish cardinal halted a plan to allow independent investigators to examine church child abuse files, said a retired archbishop.

In a letter to the British Catholic weekly *The Tablet*, retired Archbishop Mario Conti of Glasgow said that Cardinal Keith O'Brien, who earlier this year admitted to acts of sexual misconduct, prevented case files from being reviewed.

Conti's letter, published online Friday, was responding to an editorial in the weekly, which had criticized how the Scottish Catholic church has dealt with clerical abuse cases.

Conti defended the record of the Scottish bishops, beginning with the introduction of robust child protection guidelines in 1999.

He then explained that as the response of the Bishops' Conference of Scotland developed over the past decade, all conference members -- except one -- agreed to a review of historical abuse cases.

"It was the intention of all but one member of the bishops' conference to commission an independent examination of the historical cases we had on file in all of our respective dioceses and publish the results, but this was delayed by the objection of the then-president of the conference," he wrote.

"Without full participation of all the dioceses, the exercise would have been faulty," wrote the archbishop, explaining why the review did not go ahead.

O'Brien served as the conference president from 2002 until 2012, when he stepped down in preparation

for his retirement.

In February, he became the focus of an international scandal. Pope Benedict XVI accepted his resignation with immediate effect after three priests and one former priest accused the cardinal of making homosexual advances toward them more than 20 years earlier.

O'Brien denied the accusations at first. Then, in a March 3 statement, he apologized, admitting his conduct had "fallen below the standards expected of me as a priest, archbishop and a cardinal."

He declined to attend the papal conclave to elect Pope Francis, and in May the Vatican asked him to leave Scotland to spend time in prayer and reparation.

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Conti's letter was published as the Scottish Catholic church faces fierce criticism over cases of clerical sex abuse in schools.

It follows a British Broadcasting Corp. documentary, "Sins of the Fathers," detailing the alleged abuse of children by Benedictine monks at two Catholic schools in Scotland over a 30-year period.

This led Bishop Hugh Gilbert of Aberdeen, Scotland, a Benedictine, to issue an apology Aug. 4 for the offenses of the monks.

In his letter to *The Tablet*, Conti said he expected that an independent review of the clerical abuse case files would go ahead as initially intended.

"I understand that in the light of the criticisms the church has been facing, these audits will now be published," he wrote.

"I think they will go some way toward confirming Bishop Joseph Devine of Motherwell's remarks that the percentage of priests involved in abuse is 'tiny,' and in demonstrating the seriousness and competence with which the church in Scotland has been dealing with safeguarding in all its implications for many years," he added.

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