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Vatican: John Paul II took 'immediate' action on sexual abuse

Joshua J. McElwee | Apr. 25, 2014
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Days before Pope John Paul II will be made a saint in an unprecedented ceremony attended by hundreds of thousands, focus at the Vatican on Friday morning remained on his record in handling the clergy sexual abuse crisis, specifically the serial abuser Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado.

Responding to questions at a briefing on John Paul II's time leading the Catholic church from 1978 to 2005, former Vatican spokesman Joaquín Navarro-Valls said the pope did not immediately understand the gravity of the sexual abuse crisis.

"I don't think Pope John Paul understood" the "cancer" of clergy sexual abuse immediately, said Navarro-Valls, adding: "I don't think anyone did."

But, the former spokesman said, once John Paul II became aware of the scope of the accusations being made against clergy, especially around the time of reporting on the Boston archdiocese in 2002, he "immediately" began taking action.

Specifically, Navarro-Valls said, procedures against Maciel "began during the pontificate of John Paul II."

"The way of addressing the pedophilia crisis started very clearly in [John Paul II's] pontificate," he said.

Navarro-Valls, a Spanish native who led the Vatican press office from 1984 to 2006, spoke at a Vatican briefing Friday intended to focus on John Paul II's ministry as pope. The Vatican has been hosting several similar briefings this week in anticipation of Sunday's canonization ceremonies for both John Paul II and his predecessor Pope John XXIII, who led the Catholic church from 1958 to 1963.

Maciel was a Mexican-born priest who founded the Legionaries of Christ, a Catholic religious order. While John Paul II repeatedly praised him for his work in recruiting priests for the church, by the late 1990s, Maciel was the subject of substantial investigative reporting regarding his alleged sexual abuse of seminarians and young people around the world, all of which was aggressively denied by Maciel, his followers and supporters.

Maciel was not publicly punished until 2006, after John Paul II's death, when Pope Benedict XVI ordered the priest to a life of penance.

It was only after Maciel's death in 2008 that it became publicly known that he had fathered several children by at least two women, whom he supported financially in Mexico and Spain, and the extent of his sexual abuse of minors, including his own children. The order he founded wouldn't unequivocally denounce his behavior until this year [1], after it emerged from a four-year Vatican-ordered and administrated reform.

The congregation's new leadership issued a statement in February expressing "deep sorrow" for Maciel's

"reprehensible and objectively immoral behavior," including "abuse of minor seminarians," "immoral acts with adult men and women," "arbitrary use of his authority and of material goods," "indiscriminate consumption of addictive medicines" and plagiarism.

Saying they were "grieved" it had taken so long to apologize to Maciel's "many victims," the members of the chapter acknowledged a "long institutional silence" in response to accusations against him and offered a progress report in efforts to overcome the founder's demoralizing legacy.

Navarro-Valls said Friday that John Paul II was not able to act more quickly in Maciel's case because the pope was dying while an investigation he ordered was being concluded. As part of that investigation, Navarro-Valls said, John Paul II had sent Charles Scicluna, then an official at the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and now an auxiliary bishop in Malta, to collect testimony in places around the world.

"The pope knew that the investigation was underway but was not informed of the results" because it was only concluded as he was dying in 2005, Navarro-Valls said.

The former spokesperson also said he met with Pope Benedict in the "first days of his pontificate" to discuss the findings in the Maciel investigation.

Navarro-Valls said he pressed upon the new pope in that meeting the importance of making the results of the investigation public, which he said Benedict immediately agreed to, telling him to hold a press conference the next day.

Also speaking Friday at the Vatican briefing was American writer George Weigel, who has written several biographies of Pope John Paul II. He also defended the pontiff's record in responding to clergy sexual abuse.

During the time of reporting on sexual abuse in the Boston archdiocese in 2002, Weigel said, there was "an information gap" between the news being made public in the United States and at the Vatican.

"I think there was an information gap particularly between the United States and the Holy See in the first months of 2002 so that the pope was not living this crisis in real time as we were in the U.S.," Weigel said.

"But once he became fully informed in April of that year, he acted decisively to deal with those problems," he said.

In April 2002, John Paul met with 12 U.S. cardinals and bishops' conference officers at the Vatican. He told them he was "deeply grieved" by news of clerical sexual abuse and said there was no place in the priesthood or religious life for those who would harm children.

Weigel also said that John Paul II had been a "great reformer" of the Catholic priesthood and had faced a "crisis" during the 1970s of "weak seminary formation" of priests, a "small minority" of who were engaging in sexual abuse.

Beyond the discussion of clergy sexual abuse, Navarro-Valls and Weigel focused on John Paul II's wider impact on society and his personal holiness.

Regarding the pope's wider impact, Weigel said he thought it was a "courageous and wise decision" of Pope Francis to canonize John XXIII and John Paul II together because they were the "two bookends" of the Second Vatican Council, a 1962-65 global meeting of Catholic bishops called by John XXIII that led to significant reforms of the church.

Where John XXIII "had the courage to start the council," Weigel said, John Paul II "had the wisdom and

courage to give [it] its authoritative interpretation."

"John Paul II recovered John XXIII's intention that Vatican II be the new Pentecost" of the church, Weigel said.

Navarro-Valls shared several personal memories of working with John Paul II for 22 years, focusing specifically on the pontiff's prayer life.

Asked when he first thought of John Paul as a saint, Navarro-Valls responded: "The first time I saw him praying. I remember very well."

While there was no magical moment like levitation, the former spokesman said, the pope seemed to be visibly speaking with someone as he was praying. "I thought, 'This is a man who is close to God,' " Navarro-Valls said.

The former spokesman remembered one time in particular, when he saw John Paul II kneeling in his personal chapel, praying while reading from different little pieces of paper.

Navarro-Valls said he was told later that those papers were bits of letters sent to the pope from people asking him to pray for them. One example, he said, was from a widowed woman whose son had become lost to drugs.

"All the misery of the world arrived to the pope," Navarro-Valls said. "I wondered: Did he have any space left to pray for his own needs because he was praying for the needs and suffering of all of humanity?"

[Joshua J. McElwee is *NCR* national correspondent. His email address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org [2]. Follow him on Twitter: @joshjmac [3].]

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