

AMERICAS

For Nuncio Accused of Abuse, Dominicans Want Justice at Home, Not Abroad

By LAURIE GOODSTEIN AUG. 23, 2014

SANTO DOMINGO, Dominican Republic — He was a familiar figure to the skinny shoeshine boys who work along the oceanfront promenade here. Wearing black track pants and a baseball cap pulled low over his balding head, they say, he would stroll along in the late afternoon and bring one of them down to the rocky shoreline or to a deserted monument for a local Catholic hero.

The boys say he gave them money to perform sexual acts. They called him “the Italian” because he spoke Spanish with an Italian accent.

It was only after he was spirited out of the country, the boys say, his picture splashed all over the local news media, that they learned his real identity: Archbishop Jozef Wesolowski, the Vatican’s ambassador to the Dominican Republic.

“He definitely seduced me with money,” said Francis Aquino Aneury, who says he was 14 when the man he met shining shoes began offering him increasingly larger sums for sexual acts. “I felt very bad. I knew it wasn’t the right thing to do, but I needed the money.”

The case is the first time that a top Vatican ambassador, or nuncio — who serves as a personal envoy of the pope — has been accused of sexual abuse of minors. It has sent shock waves through the Vatican and two predominantly Catholic countries that have only begun to grapple with clergy sexual abuse: the Dominican Republic and

Poland, where Mr. Wesolowski was ordained by the Polish prelate who later became Pope John Paul II.

It has also created a test for Pope Francis, who has called child sexual abuse “such an ugly crime” and pledged to move the Roman Catholic Church into an era of “zero tolerance.” For priests and bishops who have violated children, he told reporters in May, “There are no privileges.”

Mr. Wesolowski has already faced the harshest penalty possible under the church’s canon law, short of excommunication: on June 27, he was defrocked by the Vatican, reducing him to the status of a layman. The Vatican, which as a city-state has its own judicial system, has also said it intends to try Mr. Wesolowski on criminal charges — the first time the Vatican has held a criminal trial for sexual abuse.

But far from settling the matter, the Vatican has stirred an outcry because it helped Mr. Wesolowski avoid criminal prosecution and a possible jail sentence in the Dominican Republic. Acting against its own guidelines for handling abuse cases, the church failed to inform the local authorities of the evidence against him, secretly recalled him to Rome last year before he could be investigated, and then invoked diplomatic immunity for Mr. Wesolowski so that he could not face trial in the Dominican Republic.

The Vatican’s handling of the case shows both the changes the church has made in dealing with sexual abuse, and what many critics call its failures. When it comes to removing pedophiles from the priesthood, the Vatican is moving more assertively and swiftly than before. But as Mr. Wesolowski’s case suggests, the church continues to be reluctant to report people suspected of abuse to the local authorities and allow them to face justice in secular courts.

The Vatican says that because Mr. Wesolowski was a member of its diplomatic corps and a citizen of the Holy See, the case would be handled in Rome. But even many faithful Catholics in this nation, home to the oldest Catholic cathedral in the Americas, say they are unsettled that a Vatican official could have been using children for sex, yet was not arrested and tried in their own country.

“From the pure standpoint of justice, he should be tried in the country where the acts took place because the conditions for trying him will not be the same elsewhere,” said Antonio Medina Calcaño, dean of the faculty of law and political science of the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo. “But all we can do is hope that the courts in the Vatican will treat this with the severity that it really deserves.”

The Vatican spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, did not say when the Wesolowski trial will start, who is representing the former nuncio, or whether he is at liberty while he awaits trial. Under Vatican law, sexual abuse charges can bring a maximum of 12 years in prison and a fine of nearly \$200,000.

A Dominican bishop, Victor Masalles, visiting Rome in late June, said in a Twitter message that he was surprised to see Mr. Wesolowski “strolling the Via della Scrofa,” in the city’s picturesque ancient center. He added, “The silence of the Church has hurt the people of God.”

A Man Known as ‘The Italian’

The waterfront promenade in the Dominican capital is dominated by a 50-foot monument to the 16th-century Spanish friar Antonio de Montesinos, dressed in robes and preaching the fiery sermon that made him famous: denouncing the slavery and abuse of the indigenous people by their Spanish colonists.

It was at the heel of this colossus, on the deserted upper plaza in the shadow of the friar’s robes, Mr. Aquino said, that he was often molested by the man he knew as “the Italian.” The man always chose a bench that would allow him to see the rare visitor coming up the staircase, and would watch the boy masturbate, would touch him or would touch himself, said Mr. Aquino, now 17. Other times, they went to the rocky beach below the statue.

Mr. Aquino, whose family is originally from Haiti, left school in the eighth grade, earning \$1.50 on a typical weekday by shining shoes. But he said that the man gave him more than \$10 the first time they met, in 2010, to shine his shoes and to swim naked in the ocean while Mr. Wesolowski watched.

The man returned often over the next six weeks, Mr. Aquino said. But gradually

the man wanted more, giving him from about \$25 to as much as \$135, as well as sneakers and a watch, for sexual acts. They met on and off over three years, Mr. Aquino said, but the man revealed little more than his first name, which he gave as “Josie.”

There is a mix of shame and anger among the shoeshine boys who say they knew the man. Darwin Quervedo, who is 14, said haltingly, with eyes downcast, that when he was 11, the man gave him more than \$25 to watch him masturbate down by the beach. He said he felt scared, and never did it again.

When he learned much later of the man’s identity, Darwin said he thought to himself, “What kind of a man who is a priest does things like this?”

The promenade is a popular stretch for tourists and joggers. But it is also frequented by those seeking children and young men for sex. With all this activity, Mr. Wesolowski, in his track suit and running shoes, did not at first attract inordinate attention. He also chose his victims carefully, the shoe shiners said.

“He wasn’t interested in me,” said Robin Quello Cintrón, 23. “He said I was too old, that he liked the younger ones.”

“I warned the younger kids, ‘Don’t go with him,’ ” said Mr. Cintrón, adding, “But the money tempted them.”

Curbing child sexual exploitation is a pressing issue in the Dominican Republic and many countries, and the Catholic Church is among the many religious institutions that have taken up the cause.

In March, Pope Francis signed onto a campaign with other global religious leaders to fight all forms of human slavery, including child prostitution. This month, he sent a message for the opening of a refuge in Argentina for young victims of sexual exploitation.

Still, two United Nations panels in Geneva examining the church’s record on child sexual abuse questioned the Vatican this year about its handling of the Wesolowski case.

Mr. Wesolowski, 66, was ordained at 23 in Krakow by Archbishop Karol Józef Wojtyła, who later became Pope John Paul II. In 1999, he was appointed papal nuncio to Bolivia, and in 2002, he was reassigned to Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

In 2008, he was sent to the Dominican Republic. Mr. Wesolowski served as a ceremonial dean of the international diplomatic corps here, convening an annual party in honor of the country's president. The posting came with a stately residence and access to a beach house.

On the waterfront, Mr. Wesolowski attempted to disguise his rank, the boys say. He drove a small gray-green Suzuki sport utility vehicle with rosary beads hanging from the rearview mirror, they recalled, and parked it near the monument in the colonial zone, where several streets are named for archbishops.

One day last year, Nuria Piera, a prominent television journalist, received a tip that the papal nuncio drank beer many afternoons at a waterfront restaurant, then went off with young boys.

Ms. Piera sent a video crew to surreptitiously film the nuncio, she said in an interview at CDN, where she is general director. The crew shot some video of Mr. Wesolowski drinking alone and walking the promenade, Ms. Piera said, but he noticed their presence (though not the camera), walked over, smacked his hand against their car and asked why they were following him.

After that, Ms. Piera said, he disappeared from the waterfront. Her tipster never saw him there again.

"I suspected that there may have been a leak from our own office," Ms. Piera said.

Mr. Wesolowski began sending a young Dominican church deacon to procure children for him, law enforcement authorities in the Dominican Republic say.

The deacon, Francisco Javier Occi Reyes, was arrested by the police on June 24, 2013, accused of solicitation of minors and taken to jail. But no one came to bail him out, and the deacon sent an anguished letter dated July 2 to Mr. Wesolowski, to be

delivered to him by hand at his office.

“We have offended God” and the church, the letter said, by sexually abusing children and adolescents “for crumbs of money.” The deacon wrote that he had agreed to find child victims for the nuncio so that “your sexual appetite can be satiated,” but that he was now asking God for forgiveness.

“Hopefully you will consider asking for God to help you to walk away from this evil disease of continuing to sexually abuse innocent children,” the letter said, according to a copy obtained by The New York Times from a Dominican Justice Ministry official.

The deacon sent copies of the letter to Cardinal Nicolas de Jesus López Rodríguez, the head of the church in the Dominican Republic, and to a Dominican bishop, Gregorio Nicanor Peña Rodríguez. The cardinal then carried the evidence to the Vatican, where he met directly with Pope Francis, according to interviews with the Dominican authorities. On Aug. 21 last year, Mr. Wesolowski was secretly recalled to Rome.

Six days later, the cardinal called the papal nuncio “a great friend and promoter of peace.”

Neither the cardinal, nor other church officials, reported the allegations to the local authorities, Dominican officials say. Vatican guidelines say that criminal sexual abuse accusations should be reported in countries where reporting is required.

The country’s attorney general, Francisco Domínguez Brito, and the district attorney of Santo Domingo, Yeni Berenice Reynoso Gómez, both said in interviews that they first learned about the allegations against Mr. Wesolowski from Ms. Piera’s television reports, which were broadcast in early September and included a child asserting that he had been abused.

Soon after, church officials here told local news media that Mr. Wesolowski had been recalled because of the allegations against him, prompting Cardinal Rodriguez to confirm that he had gone to the Vatican to address the matter. He and other church officials denied requests for an interview.

‘The Most Terrible Case’

The district attorney, Ms. Reynoso, said her investigators had identified four children aged 12 to 17 with whom the nuncio had sexual contact, but that there were likely others.

The 17-year-old had epilepsy, and the nuncio gave him medicine for his condition in exchange for sexual acts, starting from when the boy was 13, the district attorney said. She said she had “no doubt” about the credibility of the youths’ testimony, because it was corroborated by other evidence.

“This is the most terrible case that I have ever seen,” said Ms. Reynoso. “He was abusing kids who were living in extreme poverty, in exchange for pills for a boy’s illness. It’s very perverse.”

The Vatican sent someone to the Dominican Republic last October to look into the case, but they made no contact with the district attorney or anyone in her office, Ms. Reynoso said. She forwarded her report to the country’s attorney general, who forwarded it to the Vatican.

Ms. Reynoso said the case should have been prosecuted in the Dominican Republic. “These children who were abused, and their families, and the Dominican society, have a legitimate right to see Jozef Wesolowski judged by a jury — not as a diplomat, but for what he really is,” she said. “A child abuser.”

Mr. Brito, the attorney general, said he trusted that the Vatican would apply the “appropriate discipline.” He said he did not seek to have Mr. Wesolowski extradited because he has diplomatic immunity, and “the law would not allow it.”

According to experts in international law, the Vatican could have waived diplomatic immunity. In Santo Domingo, there have been small protests and petitions signed by more than a thousand people calling on the Vatican to extradite Mr. Wesolowski to the Dominican Republic. Advocates have accused the government of acquiescing to the church. “We think there has been a lot of impunity in this case, and no transparency,” said Sergia Galván, executive director of the Women and Health Collective, which represents abuse victims. “If he’s no longer a diplomat, if he

was stripped of that title, he no longer has immunity.”

The case has reverberated in Poland, where prosecutors have sought to extradite Mr. Wesolowski, who holds both Vatican and Polish citizenship. Poland has indicted another Polish priest, the Rev. Wojciech Gil, who fled the Dominican Republic last year amid allegations that he abused altar boys in his rural parish. Prosecutors in the Dominican Republic say that Father Gil and Mr. Wesolowski spent time with young boys at the nuncio’s beach house.

There are indications from Rome that the pope himself is concerned about the Wesolowski case. A Dominican bishop, Fausto Ramón Mejía, said in an interview that when he was part of a delegation visiting the Vatican late last year, Pope Francis’ smile vanished on hearing what country he was from.

“He became very serious,” said Bishop Mejía. “He stopped and he said to me, very sincerely, ‘I feel as though my heart was crossed by a dagger from what took place in the Dominican Republic.’ ”

The case has shaken this stalwart Catholic nation, but the church has said little. In one group photograph released by the Dominican bishops, Mr. Wesolowski’s face appeared to have been removed from the picture.

“The people used to say, ‘I want my child to go to a Catholic church,’ ” said the Rev. Rogelio Cruz, a Catholic priest here. “Now they say, ‘No child of mine is ever going to a Catholic church.’ ”

Ezra Fieser and Meridith Kohut contributed reporting from Santo Domingo, and Gaia Pianigiani from Rome.

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