

The New York Times |

EUROPE

Bishop, 73, in Belgium Steps Down Over Abuse

By ELISABETTA POVOLEDO APRIL 23, 2010

ROME — The longest-serving bishop in Belgium resigned Friday after admitting to sexually abusing “a boy in my close entourage” many years ago, becoming the latest cleric to quit in a spreading abuse scandal.

The development added to a corrosive catalog of disclosures that has damaged the credibility of the Roman Catholic Church and shaken the trust of many believers in their spiritual leaders.

In a statement issued by the Vatican on Friday, Roger Vangheluwe, 73, the bishop of Bruges since 1985, said that the abuse had occurred “when I was still a simple priest and for a while when I began as a bishop.”

“This has marked the victim forever,” he said.

The bishop said that he had asked the victim and his family several times to forgive him, but that the wound had not healed, “neither in me nor the victim.” A recent media storm merely deepened the trauma, he said. “I am profoundly sorry,” he said.

This week, in a rare public comment directly addressing the issue of abuse, Pope Benedict XVI promised that the church would take action to deal with the crisis.

Bishop Vangheluwe is the first Belgian bishop to step down since the abuse scandal began to erupt in recent months in several European countries. Bishops

elsewhere have resigned, though. On Thursday the church authorities in Germany said that Bishop Walter Mixa, one of the country's most prominent and outspoken conservative clerics, had tendered his resignation after being accused of beating children decades ago.

On the same day, the Vatican said the pope had accepted the resignation of Bishop James Moriarty of Kildare and Leighlin, Ireland. Bishop Moriarty had been cited in an Irish government report on the mishandling and concealment of cases of priestly abuse.

Most bishops who have quit have done so because they were accused of covering up accusations against priests under their authority. While not as common, several bishops before Bishop Vangheluwe have been personally accused of abuse.

Several American bishops have stepped down in the wake of allegations of sexual abuse or assault. So have a Norwegian bishop, Georg Mueller, who resigned last May, and an Austrian cardinal, Hans Hermann Groer, who resigned in 1998.

Bishop Vangheluwe's statement was also read to reporters at a news conference in Brussels by Archbishop André-Joseph Léonard, who called Bishop Vangheluwe a "generous and dynamic bishop," but said that his transgression would shock many.

"We are aware of the crisis of confidence his resignation will set in motion," Archbishop Léonard said. But he stressed that the Catholic Church in Belgium was determined to "turn over a leaf from a not-very-distant past when such matters would pass in silence or be concealed."

The resignation came 10 years after the church in Belgium set up a commission to look into complaints of abuse that frequently seemed at loggerheads with the church leadership.

Archbishop Léonard acknowledged in an Easter homily this year that as the Vatican leadership confronted persistent accusations of abuse, "the reputation of church leaders was given a higher priority than that of abused children," The Associated Press reported.

Correction: April 23, 2010

An earlier version of this article misstated the year in which Roger Vangheluwe became bishop of Bruges. He became bishop in 1985, not 1984.

Alan Cowell contributed reporting from Paris.

A version of this article appears in print on April 24, 2010, on page A4 of the New York edition with the headline: Bishop, 73, In Belgium Steps Down Over Abuse.

© 2016 The New York Times Company