

Catholic Church Abuse Commission: Deceased Dutch Bishop Was Child Molester

The Dutch Catholic Church, in a rare admission of guilt among senior clergy, has confirmed that a bishop who died last year had sexually abused two boys decades earlier.

The Diocese of Roermond said a Church commission had found that accusations against former Bishop Joannes Gijzen, dating back to his time as chaplain at a minor seminary from 1958 to 1961, were “well founded.”

The admission came on Friday, the same day that Pope Francis made his first public plea for forgiveness for “all the evil” committed by priests who molested children, and said the Church had to do more to discipline wayward clerics.

Mea Culpa, a Dutch group supporting abuse victims, welcomed the Roermond statement. But it said the accusations had been made while Gijzen was alive, and noted critically that “complaints against living suspects are often declared unfounded.”

Bishop Frans Wiertz, current head of Roermond Diocese, said he accepted the commission’s findings and “regrets the abuse and suffering inflicted on the victims.” He has personally met the two men and apologized to them, he said.

The Church’s statement put Gijzen, who headed the diocese in southeastern Netherlands from 1972 to 1993, among the few senior Catholic clergy worldwide found guilty of abuse.

Katholiek Nieuwsblad, the weekly that broke the story, said the commission found Gijzen had groped the two boys and forced one to perform oral sex.

Gijzen had been confronted with the oral sex accusation in 2011, but denied knowing his accuser. The commission reopened his case a week after Gijzen died because it received the second complaint of improper genital touching, the weekly said. It concluded that Gijzen's denial was not credible because the victim's family had said he used to visit them.

Bishops Blamed

Gijzen was one of several strict conservative bishops whom the Vatican appointed in the Netherlands—often over the protests of priests and parishioners—to roll back the strongly reformist turn that the Church took there in the 1960s.

He officially stepped down as bishop of Roermond in 1993 on health grounds, but later served as bishop of the tiny Catholic community in Iceland from 1996 to 2007. An abuse commission there accused him of covering up molestation by another priest.

Few bishops have been accused of active abuse in the scandal, which has been rocking the Catholic Church for over two decades. Most of the prelates who have stepped down did so for covering up the misdeeds of their priests.

Two cardinals—Hans Hermann Groer of Vienna and Edinburgh's Keith O'Brien—quit in disgrace amid accusations of sexual misconduct with seminarians. A Belgian bishop, Roger Vangheluwe of Bruges, stepped down after admitting molesting his nephew.

The Vatican has been investigating sexual abuse allegations against Archbishop Josef Wesolowski, its former nuncio (ambassador) to the Dominican Republic, since last September. His whereabouts and the status of his case are not known.

Pope Francis, who has been criticized by victims' support groups for not taking a sufficiently strong stand against sexual abuse, last month named a high-level group including an

Irish abuse victim to help fight sexual abuse in the Church.

That came after the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child accused the Church in February of systematically turning a blind eye to clerical sexual abuse of minors. The Vatican called its report “distorted” and “unfair.”

Terry McKiernan, founder of the website , which documents abuse cases, welcomed the pope’s latest comments but said victims wanted to see Church leaders taken to task for allowing abuse to continue.

“The best thing he could have done today would have been to step up to the microphone and announce that he is beginning to remove bishops who have behaved criminally in keeping priests in ministries where they don’t belong,” he said.

Reporting by Tom Heneghan

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