

Ex-Pope Benedict Denies Covering up Sexual Abuse

Former Pope Benedict has denied that he tried to cover up sexual abuse of children by Roman Catholic priests, in his first direct published comments since he stepped down.

The comments—which a victims' group rejected—were made in an 11-page letter to Italian author and mathematician Piergiorgio Odifreddi, who had written a book about the problems facing the Roman Catholic Church before the pope resigned in February.

“As far as you mentioning the moral abuse of minors by priests, I can only, as you know, acknowledge it with profound consternation. But I never tried to cover up these things,” said Benedict, who now has the title Emeritus Pope.

Excerpts of the letter were published in the Rome newspaper La Repubblica on Tuesday with the former pope's permission.

It was believed to be the first time Benedict has responded to the sexual abuse accusations in the first person, although the Vatican has always said he did much to put an end to sexual abuse of minors by priests and never tried to cover it up.

It was also the first time since Benedict resigned on Feb. 28 that anything precise that he has written or said was published, although some people who have visited him in the Vatican house where he is living in retirement have indirectly reported to outsiders some of his comments to them.

Victims groups have accused Benedict of not doing enough to stop the abuse of children by priests while he was pope and before when he was head of the Vatican's doctrinal office, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF).

The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP), rejected his assertion.

“In the Church’s entire history, no one knew more but did less to protect kids than Benedict,” SNAP said in statement.

“As head of CDF, thousands of cases of predator priests crossed his desk. Did he choose to warn families or call police about even one of those dangerous clerics? No. That, by definition, is a cover up,” the SNAP statement said.

Victims’ groups say there is much still to be discovered about how the Church behaved in the past and want more bishops who were aware of abuse to be held responsible.

The Catholic Church’s crisis came to light in Boston in 2002 when media began reporting how cases of abuse were systematically covered up and abusive priests were shuttled from parish to parish instead of being defrocked and handed over to civil authorities.

Since then, the Catholic Church in many countries has set up new guidelines to deal with cases of past abuse, prevent new cases, report abuse to police, and stop potential abusers from entering the priesthood in the first place.

The rest of the letter from Benedict to Odifreddi referred to other aspects of the author’s book, called “Dear Pope, I Am Writing You”, such as the conflict between good and evil.

(Editing by Alison Williams and Angus MacSwan)

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