

Vatican to Cooperate in Dominican Rep. Pedophilia Investigation

The Vatican said on Thursday it would cooperate with Dominican Republic authorities investigating the Holy See's former ambassador on suspicion of pedophilia and denied the envoy had been recalled to protect him from local justice.

Archbishop Jozef Wesolowski, 55, was recalled in August and relieved of his duties after local media accused him of sexual abuse of children.

In the first formal statement on the case, the Vatican said its sex crimes prosecutor had opened an investigation into the allegations.

Cardinal Nicolas Lopez Rodriguez of Santo Domingo personally informed Pope Francis in late July that there had been "serious accusations" against Wesolowski, Vatican spokesman Father Federico Lombardi said in the written statement.

The Vatican had formally told the Santo Domingo government "of its intention to cooperate with Dominican authorities if they request it," Lombardi added.

He denied suggestions in the local media that the archbishop, a Pole who had been in the post for nearly six years, had been recalled in order to shield him from Dominican justice.

"The recall of the nuncio is in no way an attempt to help him avoid responsibility for whatever is eventually ascertained," the spokesman said.

Dominican Attorney General Francisco Domínguez Brito has appointed a special prosecutor to investigate Wesolowski, whose whereabouts are not known and who could not be reached

for comment.

Dominican authorities have said they might seek Wesolowski's extradition. The Vatican does not have an extradition treaty with the Dominican Republic.

But diplomatic sources said an extradition could be possible if the archbishop was eventually detained in another country, such as Italy or his native Poland.

The special prosecutor, Bolivar Sanchez, told reporters on Wednesday his office had interviewed seven boys aged between 13-18 who the authorities believed had been sexually abused.

"The testimonies of these children have been heartbreaking, convincing and delicate," Sanchez said.

Weeks after his election in March as the first non-European pontiff in 1,300 years, Pope Francis announced he wanted the Catholic Church to root out sexual abuse of children by priests and ensure abusers are punished.

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