

Belgian abuse victims file class-action suit against church

GHENT, Belgium – More than five dozen victims of clergy sexual abuse have filed a class-action suit against the Catholic Church – including the Holy See – for failing to prevent the abuse.

The announcement by lawyers in Ghent came two days after Belgian bishops agreed to compensate victims of abuse even if the statute of limitations had run out.

Lawyer Walter van Steenbrugge told the June 1 news conference that Vatican officials and Belgian bishops would be called to testify in the proceedings.

Last year, after reports of abuse rocked the Belgian church, an independent commission discovered sexual abuse in most Catholic dioceses and all church-run boarding schools and religious orders.

The commission said 475 cases of abuse had been reported to it between January and June. The cases included more than 300 cases that involved boys younger than 15 at the time the abuse occurred, sometimes decades ago. Two-thirds of victims were male, the report said, while 13 had killed themselves and six more attempted suicide.

In one of the more prominent cases, Bruges Bishop Roger Vangheluwe was forced to resign after admitting to years of abusing his nephew. In April of this year, he told Belgian television that he had molested another nephew and that it had all started “as a game.”