

Belgian bishop admits abuse; pope accepts resignation

VATICAN CITY – Pope Benedict XVI has accepted the resignation of a Belgian bishop who admitted to sexually abusing a young man.

Bishop Roger Vangheluwe of Brugge, Belgium, said in a statement April 23, “When I was still a simple priest and for a certain time at the beginning of my episcopacy, I sexually abused a young man.”

Pope Benedict accepted the 73-year-old bishop’s resignation April 23. Bishop Vangheluwe had led the Diocese of Brugge for more than 25 years.

In his statement, the Belgian bishop said, “Over the course of the last decades, I repeatedly recognized how I sinned against him and his family and I asked forgiveness. But this did not appease him. Nor me.

“The media storm in the last few weeks has reinforced the trauma,” the bishop said. “It is no longer possible to continue in this situation.”

Bishop Vangheluwe said, “I am deeply sorry for what I did and I offer my sincerest apologies to the victim, to his family, to the whole Catholic community and society in general.

“I offered my resignation as bishop of Brugge to Pope Benedict XVI. It was accepted Friday. Therefore, I have retired,” he said.

Archbishop Andre-Joseph Leonard of Mechelen-Brussels held a press conference April 23 and issued a statement in which he said the church’s first concern was for the victim and his “long Calvary,” which still has not ended.

The archbishop also said that Bishop Vangheluwe has the same right as anyone else “to conversion, trusting in the mercy of God,” even though it is clear that “out of respect for the victim and his family and out of respect for the truth, it is indispensable that he resign” as bishop.

Archbishop Leonard said that in accepting the bishop's resignation immediately, the pope underlined how "in these matters there can be no procrastination."

He said he held the press conference because the Catholic Church in Belgium knows that transparency, "not silence or covering up" the matter, is needed for healing.