

Belgian cardinal's spokesman says no abuse cover-up, just naiveness

OXFORD, England - A spokesman for Belgian Cardinal Godfried Danneels said the transcript of an April meeting with a victim of clergy sex abuse has been interpreted out of context.

"There was no intention of any cover-up," said Toon Osaer, spokesman for the cardinal, who retired in January as archbishop of Mechelen-Brussels.

"Seen from today's perspective, the cardinal realizes he was rather naive to think he could help the family in question reach a reconciliation," he told Catholic News Service Aug. 30. "At that moment, however, the family didn't want to make public something they'd kept secret for 24 years."

Belgium's Flemish-language De Standaard and Het Nieuwsblad dailies published an alleged transcript of the cardinal's April meeting with relatives of the nephew of Bishop Roger Vangheluwe of Brugge. The unnamed nephew was abused by his uncle before and after the bishop's 1985 consecration.

Osaer told CNS that Cardinal Danneels had not kept notes from the "informal private meeting" April 8 and could not verify the transcript's accuracy. He added that he believed the text was "broadly correct" but said the context had been "totally different" than newspapers currently claimed.

"This was a totally confidential meeting, and the family intended to keep it all within the family," the spokesman said. "This is why the cardinal tried to see if a reconciliation was possible. He asked the victim if Vangheluwe should resign immediately, pointing out that we would then have to provide an explanation for his departure. He said if the resignation could be left for another year, it would not be necessary to bring the family's internal affairs into the open."

Osaer told CNS that Cardinal Danneels had offered his advice because the family "disagreed sharply" over the best course of action.

Bishop Vangheluwe resigned April 23 after admitting abusing his nephew for 13 years.

According to the text, Cardinal Danneels drew a distinction between “public and private punishment” of the bishop and suggested “forgiveness and forgiving” to the unnamed victim, who said he would leave the decision about going public to the cardinal.

In an Aug. 28 statement to Belgian newspapers, Osaer said Cardinal Danneels “condemned and profoundly regretted” the abuse by Bishop Vangheluwe but also regretted the April meeting had been recorded without the knowledge of those present.

In a May pastoral letter to Catholics, the bishops of Belgium asked forgiveness of victims of priestly sexual abuse and promised wide-ranging steps to curb the problem in the future.

In late June, while the bishops were meeting in Brussels, police seized 475 files compiled by a church commission on clergy sexual abuse. Police detained the bishops for nine hours and took away their cell phones, and a laptop belonging to Cardinal Danneels.

On Aug. 28, Belgian Justice Minister Stefaan De Clerck called for a new church commission on clergy abuse and urged the Catholic Church to “continue assuming its responsibilities.”

Osaer said the bishops’ conference had already decided to set up a new commission and would announce its members by mid-September.