

Italian bishops insist on air time to rebut BBC program

VATICAN CITY – Church officials must have an opportunity to comment on-air if Italy's state-run television airs a British documentary about the priest sex abuse crisis, said an Italian bishops' conference official.

"We do not want any censorship," Bishop Giuseppe Betori, general secretary of the Italian bishops' conference, told reporters May 22 in the midst of a very public debate over whether RAI, the state-run television network, should broadcast "Sex Crimes and the Vatican," a 2006 documentary of the British Broadcasting Corp.

Officials at RAI announced late May 22 that they would permit the program to be broadcast, but said the 40-minute documentary would be aired within the context of a talk show, and the guests would include officials from the Italian church.

Bishop Betori said it was essential that someone, either at RAI or the bishops' conference, explain to the public "all of the falsities it seems to contain" when the program airs, probably May 31.

He said the program implies that when Pope Benedict XVI, as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, was head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he issued norms for handling clerical sex abuses cases aimed at covering up the crimes.

The documentary said that in 2001 then-Cardinal Ratzinger issued an updated version of a 1962 Vatican document, "Crimen Sollicitationis" ("The Crime of Solicitation"), which the documentary said laid down the rules for covering up sexual scandals.

After the documentary aired Oct. 1 in Great Britain, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor of Westminster lodged a formal complaint with the BBC, saying that while no one could deny the "devastating effects of child abuse in our society," particularly when committed by a priest, the documentary "sets out to inflict grave damage on Pope Benedict."

“The main focus of the program is to seek to connect Pope Benedict with (the) cover-up of child abuse in the Catholic Church,” the cardinal said. “This is malicious and untrue and based on a false presentation of church documents.”

Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Birmingham, England, had criticized the documentary as a “deeply prejudiced attack on a revered world religious leader,” misrepresenting the two Vatican documents.

“The first document, issued in 1962, is not directly concerned with child abuse at all but with the misuse of the confessional,” he said. “The second document clarified the law of the church, ensuring that the Vatican is informed of every case of child abuse and that each case is dealt with properly. ... It is a measure of the seriousness with which the Vatican views these offenses.”