

Pope deplores police methods in raid on Belgian church headquarters

VATICAN CITY - Pope Benedict XVI joined a chorus of criticism of a raid on Belgian church headquarters by police seeking evidence of alleged clergy sexual abuse.

In a June 27 letter of solidarity to Belgian bishops, he called the blitz on the Mechelen-Brussels Archdiocese "surprising and deplorable" for the heavy-handed way it was carried out.

However, the pope also reiterated his position that accusations of abuse of minors within the Catholic Church should be pursued by civil as well as church authorities.

Meanwhile, members of an independent commission created by the church to examine clerical sexual abuse accusations resigned June 28, saying that the police raids have made it impossible for them to continue their work.

Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Vatican secretary of state, had harsher words regarding the raid June 24, in which bishops gathered for a plenary meeting were detained all day as police confiscated cell phones, documents and computers.

"There are no precedents for this, not even in the old Communist regimes," he told reporters in Rome June 26.

"Magistrates held bishops for nine hours and searched the tombs of two cardinals," Cardinal Bertone said, likening the "unheard of" episode to a "kidnapping."

He said that during the detention, the nine bishops and archdiocesan personnel were unable to eat or drink, an accusation Belgian authorities have denied.

Pope Benedict's letter marking "this sad moment" was addressed to Mechelen-Brussels Archbishop Andre-Joseph Leonard, president of the Belgian bishops' conference. The pope expressed his "closeness and solidarity" with the bishops "for

the surprising and deplorable methods of the searches” of the Mechelen Cathedral and archdiocesan buildings.

Mechelen, the seat of the church in Belgium, is a suburb of Brussels.

During the plenary meeting, the pope wrote, “the Belgian bishops’ conference was to have discussed aspects of the abuse of minors on the part of members of the clergy.”

“Many times,” he continued, “I have reiterated that such serious charges must be dealt with by civil and canonical authorities, in respect of reciprocal specificity and autonomy.”

The pope said justice should take its course, while respecting the rights of individuals, institutions and especially the victims. He urged that the efforts of those in the church who are collaborating with civil authorities and trying to shed light on the problem be recognized.

During the nine-hour search, a spokesman for the bishops’ conference said, police seized more than 400 files belonging to a commission established to investigate alleged abuse cases.

Commission members announced they would resign because “the indispensable trust” between the commission and judicial authorities “no longer exists,” therefore compromising the commission’s relationship of trust with the victims, according to a statement from the bishops’ conference.

The statement also said that members were prohibited from working because police had confiscated all of their materials.

Belgian Justice Minister Stefaan De Clerck defended the action, saying that bishops had been treated normally and that proper legal procedures were followed.

Vatican and Belgian church authorities were particularly angered over the search of the tombs of two cardinals in the cathedral crypt. News reports said that holes had been drilled in the tombs and cameras inserted to look for possible hidden material.

Police searched the homes of Archbishop Leonard as well as his predecessor at the helm of the Mechelen-Brussels Archdiocese, Cardinal Godfried Danneels.

It was not known what police were looking for at the cardinal's home. He was archbishop during the service of former Bishop Roger Vangheluwe of Brugge, who stepped down in April after admitting to having sexually abused a young boy.

On June 25, the Vatican announced he would be replaced by Bishop Jozef De Kesel, who had been auxiliary bishop of Mechelen-Brussels.

In May, 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 a pastoral letter addressed to the faithful.