

Vatican expresses surprise, indignation at raid on Belgian archdiocese

VATICAN CITY - In a strongly worded statement, the Vatican expressed surprise and indignation at the way Belgian police carried out a raid on the headquarters of the Belgian Catholic Church in connection with an investigation into alleged priestly sex abuse.

The statement June 25 from the Vatican Secretariat of State expressed "true surprise" for the nine-hour-long police blitz and "indignation" for what it said was the violation of tombs of two late cardinals during the search June 24.

News reports said that in the raid, police had sealed off the headquarters of the Archdiocese of Mechelen-Brussels, including the residence of Archbishop Andre-Joseph Leonard. They also searched the home of Cardinal Godfried Danneels, the retired archbishop for the archdiocese.

The Vatican statement included the description of the raid provided by a spokesman for the Belgian bishops' conference, detailing how bishops gathered for a scheduled meeting at the headquarters had been surprised by police who then confiscated documents and cell phones of all present.

It said that everyone had been questioned, and that while the interrogations had taken place in "a correct manner," that it had not been "a pleasant experience."

Neither bishops nor personnel were allowed to leave the building from 10:30 a.m. until 7:30 p.m., according to the statement.

The statement also said the Vatican "reiterates the firm condemnation of every sinful and criminal act of abuse of minors on the part of members of the church, as well as the need to remedy and face such acts in a way that conforms to the requirements of justice and teachings of the Gospel."

It continued, "It is in the light of such necessity that the Secretary of State expresses true surprise for the way in which the searches were conducted yesterday by Belgian judicial authorities, and its indignation at the fact that there was the violation of the tombs of the Cardinals Jozef-Ernest van Roey and Leo Jozef Suenens, late archbishops of the archdiocese of Mechelen-Brussels.

The statement said the authorities had violated the confidentiality of victims by seizing material under scrutiny by a special commission established by the archdiocese to examine alleged cases of priestly abuse.

Investigators took documents and a computer from Cardinal Danneels' residence but did not question him, according to a spokesman for the cardinal. He said Cardinal Danneels was cooperating with authorities.

Belgian police have been investigating clerical sexual abuse for several years. Bishop Roger Vangheluwe, 73, of Brugge, Belgium, resigned April 23 after admitting he sexually abused a boy. He had headed the Brugge Diocese for more than 25 years.

The Vatican announced June 25 that he will be replaced by Bishop Jozef De Kesel, formerly auxiliary bishop of Mechelen-Brussels.

According AFP, Archbishop Leonard told reporters June 25 "the justice system does its work and it has the right to carry out searches. Nonetheless, I find it slightly surprising that it went as far as rummaging around the tombs of bishops and that all the bishops were held until evening."

He said the "sequestration" of the bishops showed "perhaps an excessive zeal," AFP reported.