

# Vicar of Rome defends his handling of abuse accusation

VATICAN CITY - Cardinal Agostino Vallini, the papal vicar of Rome since 2008, has defended his handling of an accusation of sexual abuse by a priest several years ago.

Cardinal Vallini said that when he was bishop of Albano, Italy, and a religious order priest was accused of sexually abusing a minor, he immediately suspended the priest and asked his superiors to transfer him and ban him from ministry anywhere, the Diocese of Rome said.

The statement was released after Italian newspapers quoted an unnamed victim of the priest as saying that when he told then-Bishop Vallini in 2002 that the priest was abusing young people in the town of Pomezia, the bishop had replied, "For now, these are only rumors."

"Cardinal Vallini categorically denies that he failed to immediately give attention to the facts and denies that he ever said, 'For now, these are only rumors,'" said the Rome diocesan statement, which was released late April 8.

"He was immediately suspended 'a divinis' and his legitimate superior was asked to transfer him immediately to another place without the exercise of his ministry," the statement said.

The victim said the accused priest, Father Marco Agostini, a member of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, was transferred to Assisi where he continued to interact with young people.

The Rome diocesan statement said Cardinal Vallini was not involved in deciding where to send Father Agostini because "it was not his competence" since the priest was a member of a religious order.

After victims went to the police in April 2006, Father Agostini was arrested, taken to Rome and placed under house arrest. He committed suicide in August 2006.

“The decision that the priest could not remain in the Diocese of Albano gave rise to strong reactions among the people of Pomezia against the bishop for the provision, which they maintained was excessively severe,” the statement said.

The people’s reaction, it said, shows how quickly and forcefully the bishop reacted “even before the veracity of the facts had been determined.”