News



Cardinal Godfried Danneels, 85, retired archbishop of Mechelen-Brussels, Belgium, died March 14, 2019, in Mechelen. He is pictured leaving a session of the extraordinary Synod of Bishops on the family at the Vatican in this Oct. 9, 2014, file photo. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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Belgian Cardinal Godfried Danneels, retired archbishop of Mechelen-Brussels, died March 14 at the age of 85.

Pope Francis expressed his condolences to Danneels' family and the Belgian faithful and praised the late prelate's zeal for the church, especially during the Synod of Bishops on the family in 2014 and 2015.

"This zealous pastor has served the church with dedication not only in his diocese but also at the national level as president of the Belgian bishops' conference, as well as serving as a member of various Roman dicasteries," the pope said in March 14 telegram to Cardinal Jozef De Kesel, the current archbishop of Mechelen-Brussels.

"I ask Christ, conqueror of evil and death, to welcome him into his peace and joy," the pope said. Born June 4, 1933, in Kanegem, Belgium, Danneels was the oldest of six children. He was ordained a priest in 1957 and two years later became chairman of the department of theology and spiritual director at the seminary in Bruges. In 1969, he became professor of theology at Louvain University.

Known as a lecturer and a liturgist, he was appointed by St. Paul VI as bishop of Antwerp in 1977. Two years later, he was named archbishop of Mechelen-Brussels and subsequently created a cardinal by St. John Paul II.

At 49, Danneels became the third youngest member of the College of Cardinals in 1983.

Throughout his life, the Belgian cardinal was outspoken in calling for a more decentralized approach to church governance that relied more on the consultation with the world's bishops.

He also called for a change in the church's approach to evangelizing in the modern world and called on the Catholic Church to admit that it might be a part of the problem of people's indifference to the existence of God.

The church "must defend the truth, but it also must be aware that defending the truth is not the same thing as never being wrong," he said in 1998. The church must take its proper place in society "with its witness, its message and its commitment to the poor. Everything else is decorative."

"We have transformed the Sermon on the Mount into a mountain of sermons," the cardinal said.

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Despite being respected within and outside the church, Danneels faced criticism in 2010 after meeting a victim of clergy sex abuse by a local bishop.

Belgium's Flemish-language De Standaard and Het Nieuwsblad dailies published an alleged transcript of the then-retired cardinal's April 2010 meeting with relatives of the nephew of Bishop Roger Vangheluwe of Bruges. The unnamed nephew was abused by his uncle before and after the bishop's 1985 consecration.

Vangheluwe resigned in the same month after admitting abusing his nephew for 13 years.

According to the text, 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.

"There was no intention of any cover-up," said Toon Osaer, then-spokesman for the cardinal.

"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, 2010. "At that moment, however, the family didn't want to make public something they'd kept secret for 24 years."

Danneels had retired in January 2010 at the age of 76.

In June that year, as part of their abuse investigations, Belgian police raided the headquarters of the Belgian bishops' conference, the chancery of the Archdiocese of Mechelen-Brussels, the cathedral — opening the tombs of two cardinals — and the

residences of then-Archbishop Andre-Joseph Leonard and Danneels.

The Belgian bishops were meeting at the time, and police confiscated documents and all of the bishops' cellphones. Police questioned each of the bishops and required all of them to stay in the building for nine hours.

A Belgian court later ruled the raid was illegal and ordered police to return all documents seized that day.

Danneels' death leaves the College of Cardinals with 222 members, 122 of whom are under the age of 80 and, therefore, eligible to vote in a conclave to elect a new pope.