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Pope John Paul II, right, with Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado at the Vatican in 2004 (CNS/Reuters

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Polish Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz, the influential former long-time personal secretary of Pope John Paul II, is denying a priest's accusation that he covered up a case of clerical abuse in 2012.

In an extraordinary Oct. 20 interview for the largest private TV station in Poland, TVN24, the cardinal also denied that John Paul had any knowledge of the crimes committed by Marcial Maciel Degollado, a serial child abuser and founder of the once-powerful Legionaries of Christ.

Dziwisz, who served as the Archbishop of Krakow from 2005 to 2016, has been accused personally of not replying to a letter he was given about the case of Janusz Szymik, a long-time victim of the abusive priest Fr. Jan Wodniak.

Fr. Tadeusz Isakowicz-Zaleski, a Krakow priest, claims to have given Dziwisz the letter in 2012.

"I don't remember conversations about that," Dziwisz told TVN24, saying the matter did not pertain to him, as Wosniak did not belong to the Krakow Archdiocese but the nearby Diocese of Bielsko-Zywiec.

"I cannot have on my conscience that I didn't help when someone sought my support," said the cardinal. "It's impossible. If I knew about all the details, I would react, although I had no right to do it because it was a different diocese."

Isakowicz-Zaleski's allegation against Dziwisz has attracted wide attention in Polish media, as the priest is the founder of the Brother Albert Foundation, one of the country's largest non-profit groups helping those who are physically or mentally disabled.

Responding to Dziwisz's interview, the priest told NCR that the cardinal had responsibility for Szymik's case as the metropolitan archbishop of the region that included the diocese where the abuse had occurred.

"Of course, the cardinal could and should have reacted then," said Isakowicz-Zaleski. "He was the metropolitan."

"The cardinal doesn't understand that silence and cover-up, which were possible 30 years ago, are not effective nowadays," the priest added.

Dziwisz served as John Paul's secretary for the entirety of the Polish pontiff's reign, from 1978 to 2005.

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The question of John Paul II's knowledge of Maciel's crimes has long been a mark on the deceased pope's legacy. When John Paul was canonized in 2014, Vatican officials claimed the pontiff had not had "personal involvement" in investigating claims made against Maciel.

But extensive reporting on Maciel's abuse was first undertaken by journalists Jason Berry and Gerald Renner in 1997. Maciel was not publicly punished until 2006, after John Paul II's death, when Pope Benedict XVI ordered the priest to a life of penance.

Dziwisz said John Paul "never hid anything, never covered up such matters."

When the interviewer asked how Maciel had continued to exert influence at the Vatican after the reports of his abusive behavior, Dziwisz said he had never been

aware of those reports.

"When these things started to come out, I asked one of Maciel's associates if he knew about it; he replied that no one in the Legionaries had heard of it," said the cardinal. "I have heard that in this matter the blame lies on John Paul II or me, but while I was in the Vatican, I never heard about it."

The interviewer also asked about the Vatican's handling at the time of reports against then-Cardinals Theodore McCarrick and Hans Groër.

McCarrick, a still living former Archbishop of Washington, is accused of inappropriate sexual conduct with adult male seminarians and was laicized in 2019. Groër, a deceased Archbishop of Vienna, was accused of sexually abusing boys.

Both McCarrick and Groër had been appointed to their posts by John Paul II.

"I don't think these are questions for me, because I didn't do it," Dziwisz responded to the query. "These things were happening in the Vatican's Secretariat of State. The pope did not talk about business matters with his friends."

"John Paul II was not afraid of such matters, but he took care of them and arranged them," said the cardinal.

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Isakowicz-Zaleski suggested that by responding to his interviewer in such a deflective manner, Dziwisz was harming John Paul's image.

"The sooner difficult matters will be explained, the more the memory of St. John Paul II, who is an important figure for many people around the world, will be clarified," said the priest.

Fr. Andrzej Kobyliński, a philosophy professor at Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski University in Warsaw, said the wider problem of John Paul's tenure was the entire "Polish entourage" that surrounded the pontiff.

"We can't reduce many difficult issues of John Paul II's pontificate to his personal secretary," said the priest.

Kobyliński noted that the popular blog Il Sismografo, which is closely watched as a source of Vatican news, has repeatedly referred to the "Polish entourage" in recent years.

Szymik's attorney suggested to NCR that the interview was a lost opportunity for the cardinal to apologize to his client and to Poland's other abuse victims.

"The word 'sorry' and recognition of negligence would help not only the victim but also the cardinal himself," said lawyer Artur Nowak.

"How in conscience can he fail to settle these matters, and yet maintain a true, personal relationship with God?" the lawyer asked.

Nowak, who is an attorney for many victims, is also a clergy abuse survivor. He noted that in recent years the taboo in Poland against reporting abuse in the church has been broken, thanks largely to media reporting and the bravery of many survivors.

"We are not the victims anymore," said Nowak. "We were saved by the courage to show the whole world our faces. It took us decades."

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