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Vatican
Cardinal Fernando Filoni, grand master of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre, is pictu

Cardinal Fernando Filoni, grand master of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre, is pictured in his office at the order's headquarters in Rome in this April 30, 202. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)



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ROME — A cardinal who had served as an aide to now-retired Pope Benedict XVI and was present for his meetings with survivors of clerical sexual abuse said he "never found in him any shadow or attempt to hide or minimize anything."

The depths of human sin and depravity "distressed him intimately, and he sometimes remained silent for a long time — all the more so if these human miseries were the responsibility of men of the church," said Cardinal Fernando Filoni, grand master of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem.

The cardinal distributed his "testimony" about Pope Benedict to the media Jan. 28, saying he wanted to present an eyewitness account of how Pope Benedict reacted to allegations of clerical sexual abuse and, especially, to the survivors of abuse in the wake of reports about the retire pope's handling of cases when he was archbishop of Munich. A report released Jan. 20 said then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger mishandled four cases.

Cardinal Filoni, who was the "sostituto" or substitute for general affairs in the Vatican Secretariat of State from 2007 to 2011, said that in that role, he met with then-Pope Benedict at least once a week and, in addition, oversaw the organization of papal trips abroad.

"He had a clear sensitivity for the victims," the cardinal said.

"When, in preparation for apostolic trips — to the United States, Australia, etc. — he received requests for meetings with victims of abuse, he spoke to me about it; he wanted to know my thoughts on how to accommodate these requests," the cardinal said.

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But in the discussions, he said, Pope Benedict always insisted on "deep respect for the victims whose identity had to be safeguarded; therefore, he wanted the meetings to take place far from the gaze of cameras" and insisted the meetings not be an "audience" with a simple handshake and exchange of pleasantries.

The meetings Cardinal Filoni said he was present for had "a spiritual dimension and took place in front of God, from whom we had to implore mercy."

Meeting the survivors in a chapel, he prayed with them and "listened, with visible and palpable emotion," the cardinal said.

"In those meetings, there was not only the sense of a humiliation suffered by the victims, but also the humiliation of a man of the church who could never have imagined that such degrading actions could happen, and yet now offered the balm of prayer and the relief of a solidarity in the name of that God."

"There was a request for forgiveness from the whole church to God, and there was a commitment that would see Benedict XVI combine mercy and justice, which he did through measures that previously had not existed," the cardinal said, referring to policies and procedures the former pope enacted to improve the handling of allegations and give justice to victims.

Austrian Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna also spoke positively of the former pope's handling of abuse during an interview Jan. 28 with ORF, the Austrian

broadcaster, according to KNA, the German Catholic news agency.

Referring to the case of the previous archbishop of Vienna, Cardinal Hans Hermann Groër, Cardinal Schönborn said then-Cardinal Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, had been "our pillar of support in Rome."

Cardinal Ratzinger, he said, demanded that "action be taken" against Cardinal Groër, who was forced to step down as archbishop of Vienna in 1995 amid allegations by five male former students that he had sexually abused them as youths in the 1960s and 1970s. Other allegations followed, and in 1998 St. John Paul ordered him to give up public ministry.