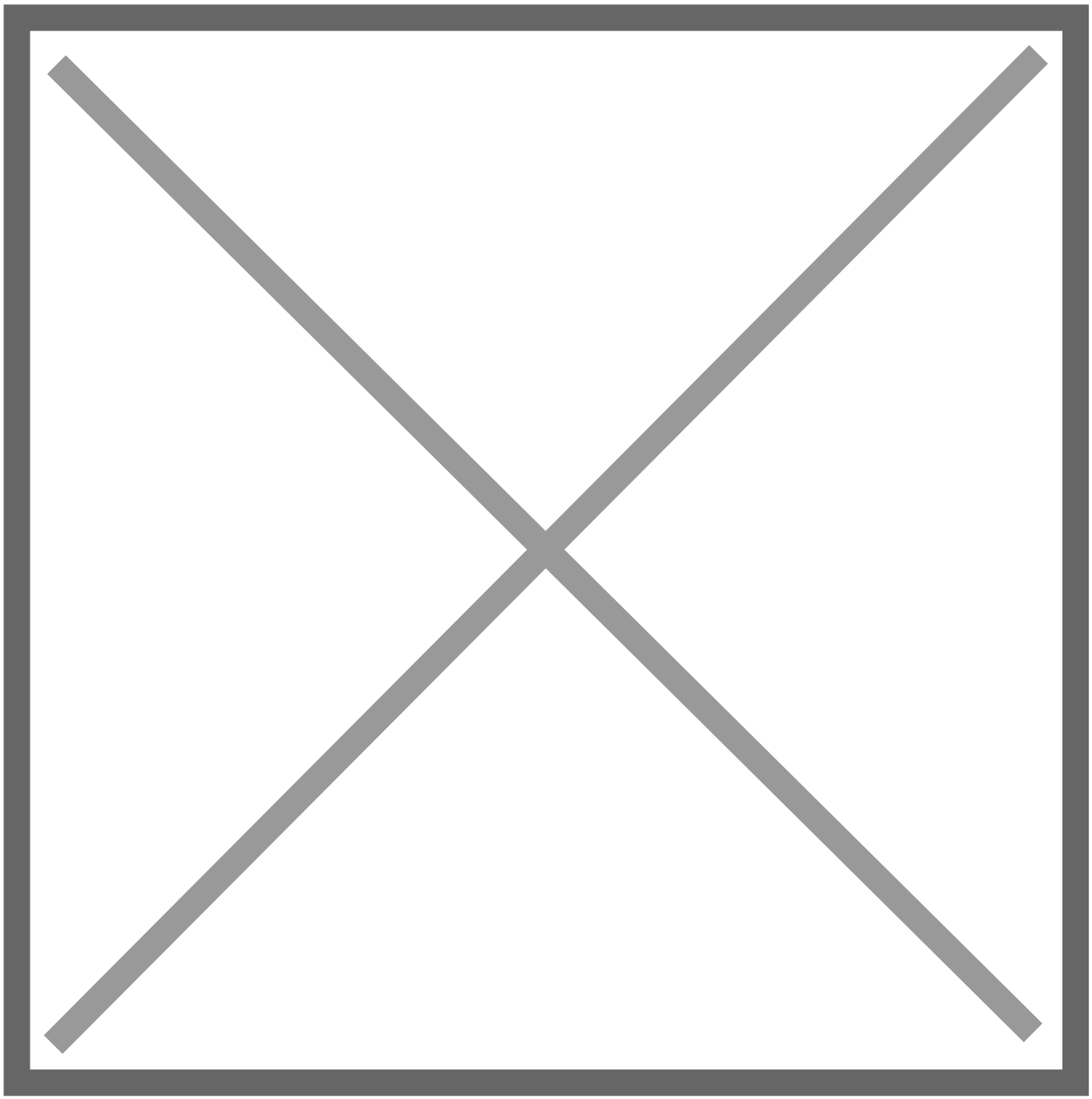
Vatican



Retired Pope Benedict XVI smiles at Germany's Munich Airport before his departure to Rome June 22, 2020. (CNS photo/Sven Hoppe, Reuters)



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ROME — Retired Pope Benedict XVI on Feb. 8 acknowledged past failings of the Catholic Church in confronting clergy sexual abuse under his watch but stopped short of a direct, personal apology after an independent report faulted his handling of four cases of abuse when he was an archbishop in Germany in the 1970s and 80s.

A legal team advising the retired pope has also published an analysis challenging the German report's findings, arguing that investigators mischaracterized some of Benedict's actions or knowledge during his time as archbishop.

"I have had great responsibilities in the Catholic Church. All the greater is my pain for the abuses and the errors that occurred in those different places during the time of my mandate," Benedict wrote in a personal letter published Feb. 8. "Each individual case of sexual abuse is appalling and irreparable. The victims of sexual abuse have my deepest sympathy and I feel great sorrow for each individual case."

Benedict, the former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, headed Germany's Archdiocese of Munich and Freising from 1977 to 1982 before being appointed as head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and then being elected pope in 2005.

The independent report, prepared by a law firm at the archdiocese's request, was tasked with looking into abuse between 1945 and 2019 and whether church officials handled allegations correctly. The report authors concluded that in four cases during Benedict's tenure in Munich involving misbehaving priests, the future pope "can be accused of misconduct."

Following the report's publication, Benedict, through his secretary Archbishop Georg Gänswein, vowed to read the report's nearly 2,000 pages of findings and offer a response. The retired pope's new Feb. 8 letter offers a personal reflection on the report's findings, as well as an analysis that challenges some of its key findings.

In the two-page personal letter, the pope reflected on his meetings with sexual abuse survivors during his travels around the world while serving as pontiff from 2005-13.

"I have seen at first hand the effects of a most grievous fault. And I have come to understand that we ourselves are drawn into this grievous fault whenever we neglect it or fail to confront it with the necessary decisiveness and responsibility, as too often happened and continues to happen," he wrote. "As in those meetings, once again I can only express to all the victims of sexual abuse my profound shame, my deep sorrow and my heartfelt request for forgiveness."

Benedict became the first pope to ever meet with survivors of clergy sexual abuse and during the final two years of his papacy, he removed nearly 400 priests for abuse.

The retired pope's letter included a meditation on the celebration of the Holy Mass, where he noted that on each occasion, "we publicly implore the living God to forgive [the sins we have committed through] our fault, through our most grievous fault."

"Every day they do cause me to question if today too I should speak of a most grievous fault," he continued. "And they tell me with consolation that however great my fault may be today, the Lord forgives me, if I sincerely allow myself to be examined by him, and am really prepared to change."

As he concluded his letter, the 94-year-old retired pope reflected on his own mortality, writing that "quite soon, I shall find myself before the final judge of my life."

"Even though, as I look back on my long life, I can have great reason for fear and trembling, I am nonetheless of good cheer, for I trust firmly that the Lord is not only the just judge, but also the friend and brother who himself has already suffered for my shortcomings," he wrote.

"In light of the hour of judgment, the grace of being a Christian becomes all the more clear to me," he continued. "It grants me knowledge, and indeed friendship, with the judge of my life, and thus allows me to pass confidently through the dark door of death."

Despite the somber tone of the letter, the retired pope also pushed back about accusations that he had intentionally deceived investigators about being present at a 1980 meeting when the case of a notorious abusive priest was discussed.

"To me it proved deeply hurtful that this oversight was used to cast doubt on my truthfulness, and even to label me a liar," he wrote.

Prior to the publication of the report, Benedict submitted 82-pages of evidence to the law firm Westpfahl Spilker Wastl, which was responsible for the investigation.

In his Feb. 8 letter, Benedict thanked his "small group of friends" who helped him review 8,000 pages of documents and prepare his response to the report.

The letter also included a three-page addendum titled an "Analysis of the facts by the collaborators of Benedict XVI," which contests many of the German report's findings and challenges assertions that as archbishop, he would have been aware of the history or suspicions of certain abusive priest's behavior.

The report was prepared by canon law professors Stefan Mückl, Helmuth Pree, Stefan Korta-Buchloe, along with German attorney Carsten Brennecke.

Of the four cases that the abuse report faulted Benedict, the retired pope's legal team concludes that Ratzinger was not "aware of sexual abuse committed or suspicion of sexual abuse committed by priests."

They also push back that as archbishop, Benedict sought to downplay a case of a priest who masturbated in front of minor-age girls. The German report faulted Ratzinger for not characterizing the incident as abuse, since there was no physical contact.

The retired pope's full testimony to investigators, they write, stated with the "utmost clarity that abuses, including exhibitionism, are 'terrible,' 'sinful,' 'morally reprehensible' and 'irreparable.'"

"As an archbishop, Cardinal Ratzinger was not involved in any cover-up of acts of abuse," the retired pope's legal team concludes.

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