Vatican
Vatican News
Pilgrims holding an image of Divine Mercy and others holding a banner featuring St. John Pau

Pilgrims holding an image of Divine Mercy and others holding a banner featuring St. John Paul II, who instituted the universal celebration of Divine Mercy Sunday, join Pope Francis for the recitation of the "Regina Coeli" prayer April 16, 2023, in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

Frances D'Emilio

View Author Profile

Associated Press

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Rome — April 17, 2023
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Pope Francis on April 16 publicly defended his predecessor Pope John Paul II, condemning as "offensive and baseless" insinuations that recently surfaced about the late pontiff.

In remarks to tourists and pilgrims in St. Peter's Square, Francis said he was aiming to interpret the feelings of the faithful worldwide by expressing gratitude to the Polish pontiff's memory.

Days earlier, the Vatican's media apparatus had described as "slanderous" an audiotape from a purported Roman mobster who insinuated that John Paul would go out looking for underage girls to molest.

The tape was played on an Italian TV program by Pietro Orlandi, brother of Emanuela Orlandi, the teenage daughter of a Vatican employee who lived at the Vatican. The

disappearance of the 15-year-old in 1983 is an enduring mystery that has spawned countless theories and so far fruitless investigations in the decades since.

Francis noted that in the April 16 crowd in the square were pilgrims and other faithful in town to pray at a sanctuary for divine mercy, a quality John Paul stressed often in his papacy, which spanned from 1978 to 2005.

"Confident of interpreting the sentiment of all the faithful of the entire world, I direct a grateful thought to the memory of St. John Paul II, in these days the object of offensive and baseless insinuations," Francis said, his voice turning stern and his words drawing applause.

Last week, Pietro Orlandi met for hours with Vatican prosecutors who earlier this year reopened the investigation into his sister's disappearance. Italy's Parliament has also begun a commission of inquest into the case.

Emanuela vanished on June 22, 1983, after leaving her family's Vatican City apartment to go to a music lesson in Rome. Her father was a lay employee of the Holy See.

Among the theories about what happened to her have been ones linking the disappearance to the aftermath of the failed assassination attempt against John Paul in 1981 in St. Peter's Square or to the international financial scandal over the Vatican bank. Still other theories envision a role played by Rome's criminal underworld.

Advertisement

The recent four-part Netflix documentary "Vatican Girl" explored those possible scenarios and provided new testimony from a friend who said Emanuela had told her a week before she disappeared that a high-ranking Vatican cleric had made sexual advances toward her.

Her brother has long insisted the Vatican knows more than it has said. The Vatican prosecutor in charge of the probe says the pontiff has given him free rein to try to find the truth.

While at the Vatican last week, Pietro Orlandi provided Vatican prosecutors with an audiotape from a purported Roman mobster insinuating that John Paul would go out looking for underage girls to molest. The Vatican's editorial director in a scathing editorial noted the insinuation lacked any "evidence, clues, testimonies or corroboration."

Writing in the Vatican's newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, Andrea Tornielli said "no one deserves to be vilified in this way, without even a shred of a clue, on the basis of the 'rumors' of some unknown figure in the criminal underworld or some sleazy anonymous comment produced on live TV."

John Paul's longtime secretary, Polish Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz, also criticized the insinuations as "unreal, false and laughable if they weren't tragic and even criminal."

Pietro Orlandi's lawyer, Laura Sgro, has insisted her client wasn't accusing anyone.