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Bishop of Antwerp, Johan Bonny, poses for a portrait at a church in Lier, Belgium, on May 24. Bonny, a prominent Belgian bishop, criticized the Vatican on Sept. 27 for failing to defrock a former bishop who admitted sexually abusing children, saying it had led to massive frustration with the highest Roman Catholic authorities. (AP/Virginia Mayo)

Raf Casert

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A prominent Belgian bishop on Sept. 27 criticized the Vatican for failing to defrock a former bishop who admitted sexually abusing children, saying it had led to massive frustration with the highest Roman Catholic authorities.

Disgraced bishop Roger Vangheluwe, who was brought down by a sexual abuse scandal 13 years ago, became a symbol in Belgium of the Roman Catholic church's hypocrisy in dealing with abuse in its own ranks.

"We, the (Belgian) bishops, have been asking for years for a reaction. The letters are there, the discussions. All noted down in lists. When will we have a reaction? And why don't we get one?" Johan Bonny, the bishop of Antwerp, said on broadcaster VRT's website.

Vangheluwe shot to international infamy amid disclosures he had sexually abused his young nephew for over a dozen years when he was a priest and later a bishop. He later admitted he also abused a second nephew. The whole time, he made light of his crimes.

Reacting to a VRT series on child sexual abuse in the church, "Deserted by God," Bonny said that even if the Belgian church authorities wanted to take more action against Vangheluwe, the Vatican stood in their way.

"I want to honestly say that our conference of bishops has been asking Rome to do this for years — through the nuncio (papal envoy) and directly in Rome," Bonny said. "Last year in November during the visit of the bishops to Rome, we put it up for discussion again, and after the umpteenth time, Rome's reaction is no different."

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The Associated Press has asked the Vatican for its reaction to Bonny's remarks.

His acknowledgment underscores a popular belief that even if there is a willingness at grassroot level to take action, the higher echelons of the Roman Catholic hierarchy are too slow or loath to take forceful action.

In Vangheluwe's case, the scandal was compounded when it became clear that his superior, Cardinal Godfried Danneels, had approached one of the victims and sought to keep the scandal secret until the bishop retired.

Rumors of child sexual abuse by clergy in the overwhelmingly Roman Catholic nation of 11.5 million had been rampant for generations, affecting just about every Catholic school or parish. However, evidence was rare: instances were rarely punished and quickly suppressed until Vangheluwe's case proved a watershed moment.

In the wake of the scandal, a special commission produced a report with harrowing accounts of Catholic clergy molesting hundreds of victims, some as young as two years old, and said the abuse led to at least 13 suicides. The head of the commission said in reality, the abuse was even worse but many victims could still not bring themselves to talk.

Despite his actions and a self-professed commitment to move "somewhere hidden" to contemplate his errors, Vangheluwe showed little remorse. While he gave up the Bruges bishopric, he refused to heed the many calls to leave the priesthood altogether.

In 2011, Vangheluwe spoke of his sexual abuse as "a little game," that involved no "rough sex" and denied he was a pedophile since he "never felt the least attraction to a child."

Trying to turn the victim into an accomplice, he said, "I had the strong impression that my nephew didn't mind at all. To the contrary."

He moved to central France to live in a Roman Catholic community, never having been officially punished for his crimes. He was never prosecuted by authorities because his actions exceeded the statute of limitations.