News



This Feb. 15, 2007 file photo shows then Bishop of Bruges Roger Vangheluwe, in Bruges, Belgium. Pope Francis has defrocked a notorious Belgian bishop who admitted 14 years ago that he sexually abused his nephew but faced no Vatican punishment. (AP/Peter Maenhoudt, file)

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Pope Francis on Thursday defrocked a notorious Belgian bishop who admitted 14 years ago that he sexually abused his nephew but faced no Vatican punishment.

The case of Roger Vangheluwe, the emeritus bishop of Brugge, long ago became a symbol of the Catholic Church's hypocrisy and dysfunction in dealing with cases of abuse. Not only was he allowed to quietly retire after the scandal broke in 2010, but the head of the Belgian church at the time, Cardinal Godfried Danneels, was caught on tape asking one of his victims to keep his abuse secret until the bishop left office.

The Vatican announcement that Francis had laicized Vangheluwe came a few months before the pope is due to visit Belgium, where the case would have been an unwelcome and problematic distraction.

Vangheluwe, 87, shot to international infamy in 2010 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. All along, he made light of his crimes, describing his abuse as "a little game" that didn't involve "rough sex."

He was allowed to retire two years shy of the normal retirement age, but faced no further punishment. It was evidence of the Holy See's general refusal at the time to sanction Catholic bishops even for admitted sex crimes.

The Vatican embassy in Belgium said in a statement Thursday that in recent months "grave new elements" had been reported to the Holy See's sex abuse office that justified reopening the case.

It didn't say what new information had been received. In recent months Belgium's own bishops have grown increasingly public in their stated outrage at the Vatican's refusal to take action against Vangheluwe.

In September, Antwerp Bishop Johan Bonny told Belgian broadcaster VRT that the Belgian bishops had asked the Vatican for years, in writing and in person, to defrock Vangheluwe but got no response.

In its statement, the Vatican embassy said that after Vangheluwe's defense was heard, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith presented the case to Francis on

March 8. Three days later, it said, Francis decided to accept the recommendation that Vangheluwe be laicized. It is the harshest punishment that the Vatican can hand down, but it just means that Vangheluwe is now a layman and cannot present himself as a priest.

He asked to be allowed to live in a retreat house “without any contact with the world” to dedicate himself to prayer and penitence, the statement said.

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Lieve Halsberghe, a Belgian advocate for abuse survivors, said the belated laicization brought no justice to Vangheluwe's victims and was a mere "PR stunt" ahead of Francis' visit later this year to Leuven, where the pope is to commemorate the 600th anniversary of Belgium's Catholic university.

"Images of child sexual abuse were found in 2011 on the man’s computer and charges were never laid, because Vangheluwe is protected in high places," Halsberghe told The Associated Press. "The gesture of the Vatican today, after 14 years of charades with letters to and from the Vatican, is no more than a PR stunt of the Vatican, pressured by the Belgian bishops."

The Vangheluwe scandal proved a watershed moment for the overwhelmingly Roman Catholic nation of 11.5 million, though he was never prosecuted criminally in Belgium because his actions exceeded the statute of limitations.

In the wake of the revelations, 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 that, in reality, the abuse was even worse but many victims could still not bring themselves to talk.

The scandal is by no means over: Belgium’s parliament is currently holding hearings on abuse, and just this week protesters demonstrated outside the French Catholic community where Vangheluwe went to live after he retired.

"Justice kneels before the church," read a sign one of the protesters held.

The Vangheluwe scandal isn't the only one that has rocked the Belgian church and laid bare its wretched legacy of abuse.

In 2019, the Vatican's Caritas charity admitted that it knew for two years of pedophilia concerns about the Belgian Salesian priest, Luk Delft, who ran its operations in the Central African Republic. But Caritas only removed Delft after CNN began investigating. It turns out, Delft had been convicted of child sexual abuse and of possession of child pornography in 2012 by a Belgian court, but the Salesians moved him to Bangui, where CNN said it found at least two more victims.

Delft was laicized and formally ousted from the Salesian order on Sept. 9, 2021, a decision that was reported to Francis on April 9, 2022, Archbishop Franco Coppola, the Vatican ambassador to Belgium, said in an email Thursday to AP.

Francis in May 2022 named Delft's former Salesian superior, the retired bishop of Ghent, Luc Van Looy, a cardinal — an honor Van Looy subsequently declined because of his poor record dealing with abuse. Van Looy was in charge of the Ghent diocese when Delft was convicted by the Ghent court of abuse in 2012.

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