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Victims' group confronts Vatican over abuse

by Francis X. Rocca by Religion News Service



Peter Isely, left, speaks to journalists as Barbara Blaine displays a picture of herself as a child and a banner saying, "Expose the Truth! Stop Secrecy," as they take part in a demonstration against child sexual abuse by clergy, in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican March 25. Isely and Blaine, both of the U.S, claim to be victims of child sexual abuse by Catholic priests. (CNS photo/Alessandro Bianchi, Reuters)

VATICAN CITY -- American victims of clerical sex abuse protested at the Vatican on Thursday (March 25), charging that Pope Benedict XVI had personally mishandled the case of a Wisconsin priest who molested up to 200 deaf boys more than 35 years ago.

"What the pope will not admit is what he knew and the Vatican knew," said John Pilmaier, Milwaukee leader of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, at an informal press conference a few yards from St. Peter's Square.

Pilmaier and three other SNAP members sought to draw attention to the case of the Rev. Lawrence C. Murphy, who was the subject of an article in Thursday's edition of the *New York Times*.

Murphy, who died in 1998, resigned in 1974 as director of a Catholic school for the deaf in the

Archdiocese of Milwaukee, following accusations that he had molested students during his nearly 25 years on the staff.

The priest received no further pastoral assignments, yet continued to work with children. Though allegations against him were apparently reported to the police, Murphy was never prosecuted.

In 1996, then-Archbishop Rembert Weakland of Milwaukee referred Murphy's case to the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), writing that he had learned only recently that Murphy might have approached some of his victims in the confessional, a violation that would have brought the case under the CDF's jurisdiction.

The CDF was at that time headed by Pope Benedict, then known as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. The office's second in command was then-Archbishop Tarcisio Bertone, now a cardinal and Vatican Secretary of State, the Catholic Church's No. 2 official.

After consulting with Bertone, Wisconsin church officials moved to try Murphy under church law, a process that could have led to his defrocking. But in January 1998, the accused asked Ratzinger to call off the trial.

Stating that he was 72 years old and "in poor health" and had "repented of any of my past transgressions," Murphy asked to be allowed to "live out the time that I have left in the dignity of my priesthood."

Later that year, Bertone instructed the Wisconsin church authorities to end judicial proceedings against Murphy.

The Vatican's actions in the Murphy case appear consistent with statements earlier this month by the Catholic official in charge of investigating clerical sex abuse, who told an Italian newspaper that his office has handled 60 percent of the cases referred to it without resorting to a trial, "above all because of the advanced age of the accused."

But the SNAP protestors stressed the gravity of Murphy's crimes, and especially the involvement of the future pope.

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"[Benedict] owes it to every survivor and their families to be honest with us and explain what happened behind those walls, what was covered up, and to finally tell us the truth," Pilmaier said.

A few hours later, the Vatican responded with a front-page article in its official newspaper L'Osservatore Romano, under the headline "No Cover-up."

Insisting on the "transparency, firmness and severity" of the pope's approach to clerical sex abuse, the newspaper denounced what it called the media's "obvious and ignoble intention of striking, at all costs, at Benedict XVI and his closest collaborators."

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