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Cardinal Levada says New York Times unfair

by Catholic News Service

SAN FRANCISCO -- The U.S. cardinal who succeeded Pope Benedict XVI as head of the Vatican doctrinal congregation said a recent news story and editorial in *The New York Times* about the pope's handling of past sex abuse cases "are deficient by any reasonable standards of fairness."

A lengthy critique by Cardinal William J. Levada, prefect of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, of a March 26 article by Laurie Goodstein and a related *New York Times* editorial was published March 30 on the Web site of *Catholic San Francisco*, archdiocesan newspaper. Cardinal Levada was archbishop of San Francisco until his 2005 Vatican appointment.

The cardinal said that in light of the recent *Times* coverage he has had to tell other cardinals and Vatican officials that "I am not proud of America's newspaper of record, *The New York Times*, as a paragon of fairness."

There was no immediate response from the public editor of the *Times* to a Catholic News Service request for comment on Cardinal Levada's remarks.

Goodstein's news story concerned the church's handling of child sex abuse charges against Father Lawrence Murphy, who served at St. John's School for the Deaf in Milwaukee from 1950 to 1974 and was believed to have abused dozens of deaf children during that time.

Cardinal Levada said he agreed "that Father Murphy deserved to be dismissed from the clerical state for his egregious criminal behavior, which would normally have resulted from a canonical trial."

But Goodstein's article was "not about failures on the part of church and civil authorities to act properly at the time," he said. Its point was "to attribute the failure to accomplish this dismissal to Pope Benedict, instead of to diocesan decisions at the time."

"She uses the technique of repeating the many escalating charges and accusations from various sources (not least from her own newspaper), and tries to use these 'newly unearthed files' as the basis for accusing the pope of leniency and inaction in this case and presumably in others," Cardinal Levada wrote.

The cardinal said Goodstein failed to explore why church and civil authorities failed to act on accusations against Father Murphy in the 1960s and 1970s, instead focusing only on the period after then-Milwaukee Archbishop Rembert G. Weakland wrote to the doctrinal congregation "asking for help in dealing with this terrible case of serial abuse."

The congregation approved the archbishop's request to begin a canonical trial against Father Murphy on charges of child sexual abuse and solicitation during confession.

"Only when it learned that Murphy was dying did the congregation suggest to Weakland that the canonical trial be suspended, since it would involve a lengthy process of taking testimony from a number of deaf victims from prior decades," Cardinal Levada said. "Instead it proposed measures to ensure that appropriate restrictions on his ministry be taken."

The cardinal also said he had received "an unsolicited letter from the judicial vicar who was presiding judge in the canonical trial telling me he never received any communication about suspending the trial, and would not have agreed to it. But Father Murphy had died in the meantime."

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"As a believer, I have no doubt that Murphy will face the one who judges both the living and the dead," Cardinal Levada added.

The cardinal also criticized the Times for failing to note "the important contribution" made by the pope to recent changes "that have helped the church to take action in the face of the scandal of priestly sexual abuse of minors."

Ignoring that contribution "seems to me to warrant the charge of lack of fairness which should be the hallmark of any reputable newspaper," he said.

Cardinal Levada said he did not "have time to deal with the Times' subsequent almost daily articles by Rachel Donadio and others, much less with Maureen Dowd's silly parroting of Goodstein's 'disturbing report.'"

"But about a man with and for whom I have the privilege of working, ... whose proactive work to help the church deal effectively with the sexual abuse of minors continues to enable us today, I ask the Times to reconsider its attack mode about Pope Benedict XVI and give the world a more balanced view of a leader it can and should count on," he added.

Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio of Brooklyn, N.Y., also criticized the Times in his homily at the chrism Mass March 30 in the Cathedral Basilica of St. James, urging local Catholics to "send a message loud and clear that the pope, our church and bishops and our priests will no longer be the personal punching bag of The New York Times."

"Two weeks of articles about a story from many decades ago, in the midst of the most holy season of the church year, is both callous and smacks of calumny," he said.

Bishop DiMarzio said he would not suggest a boycott of the Times, because "we need to know what the enemy is saying."

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