

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

June 27, 2010 at 8:56am

In Belgium, anti-pedophile priest rips 'silence and omissions' of bishops

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today

Back in April, retired Belgian priest and anti-pedophilia crusader Fr. Rik Devillè told reporters that he had informed church authorities more than fifteen years ago about sexual abuse allegations against Bishop Roger Vangheluwe of Bruges, but no action was taken. Vangheluwe resigned on April 23, admitting that he had repeatedly abused his teenage nephew in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Devillè, 65, served for thirty years as the pastor of the Church of St. John Bosco in Buizingen, in the southern zone of Brussels. In 1992, Devillè began collecting information on charges of sexual abuse by priests. Today he claims that an association he founded, "Rights and Liberty in the Church," has more than 300 files on such cases.

In the wake of the recent police raid on church offices and residences in Belgium, the Italian newspaper *La Stampa* interviewed Devillè, 65, on June 27. Devillè described the raids as a "good thing," saying "it's about time that the justice system seeks out the guilty."

The following is an *NCR* translation of that interview.

The Belgian church instituted its own commission to investigate charges of abuse, the Adriaenssens Commission. Is that not enough?

The problem was its connection with the Archdiocese, and the absence of either a lay component internally or a connection with the civil authorities. I always hoped that a truly independent commission would be formed, an organism whose objective was to help justice take its course. That must be the way. It's not up to the church to decide who violated the law and who should be punished.

Do you believe that Belgium is a special case? Or is the plague of sexual abuse by clergy a common evil?

It happens everywhere, believe me. Belgium believed itself to be an exception because no case ever came to light. Yet as early as 1994, I had collected 82 accusations. The victims wanted to be heard by the church, they wanted to break the curse. It's been useless, at least up to now.

You have said that you spoke with Cardinal Godfried Danneels, the former primate of the Belgian church, but he says he doesn't remember.

I spoke with him about my files on two occasions, in the first half of the 1990s. I advised him of the problem, and I don't know what he did afterwards. On one occasion, however, I remember that the cardinal became angry. He said this wasn't my job and that I should stay out of it.

Do you think he said that to hide something?

The bishops have a long history over their shoulders of silence and omissions. They protect the guilty, and not the victims.

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How are the Belgians reacting? They're a very Catholic people ?

They were, once upon a time. Beginning in the 1970s, the Catholic church has become steadily less democratic and the faithful have distanced themselves from it. It looks to the past, to a power that's rotting. Progress isn't talked about anymore, of putting an end to celibacy, for example, or ordaining women priests.

Do you believe that would be a solution for repairing the relationship with the people?

Certainly not by itself. The church must not return to the Middle Ages, but entrust itself in a more concrete manner to the letter of the Gospel, taking care of the poor and the weak, and renouncing the ostentation of earthly power. If not, the only possibility is moving slowly towards its end.

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