

Belgium a 'perfect storm' on sex abuse crisis

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 28, 2010



Archbishop Andre-Joseph Leonard of Mechelen-Brussels speaks at a press conference introducing Bishop Jozef De Kesel, left, as the newly-named bishop of Brugge, Belgium, June 25 in Brussels. Bishop De Kesel, former auxiliary bishop of Mechelen-Brussels, replaces Bishop Roger Vangheluwe, who stepped down April 23 after admitting to sexually abusing a boy. (CNS photo/Francois Lenoir, Reuters)

Analysis

As a remarkable war of words between the Vatican and Belgium heated up over the weekend, one thing has become crystal clear: While there's no good place for the Catholic church to experience a sexual abuse crisis, few places on earth are quite as combustible as Belgium.

The June 3 raid, which reportedly included drilling holes into the tombs of two deceased archbishops of Brussels to see if any documents lurked inside, illustrates that when it comes to the sexual abuse crisis, Belgium represents a 'perfect storm.'

That's the case for at least three reasons:

- In the 1990s, Belgium experienced a horrific pedophilia scandal that left the country extraordinarily sensitive to issues of child sexual abuse.
- Belgium is among the most secularized corners of Europe, so skepticism of institutional religion, and especially the Catholic church, is a powerful social current.
- The transition in Brussels this February from Cardinal Godfried Danneels to Archbishop André-Joseph Léonard, a much more conservative figure, cemented impressions in some quarters that the church is turning its back on a spirit of compromise.

Fallout from the police raids continued on Monday, as a panel set up by the Catholic church in Belgium to investigate complaints of sexual abuse announced it was closing operations. Chairman Peter Adriaenssens, one of the country's leading experts in child psychology and chair of the church panel, said Belgian police had betrayed the trust of victims who approached the panel in confidence.

Meanwhile, the crossfire between the Vatican and Belgium showed no signs of abating.

Over the weekend, Pope Benedict XVI called the raids "deplorable," and Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's Secretary of State, said the raids were "unprecedented, even in the old Communist regimes." Bertone's top deputy for foreign relations, French Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, called in the Belgian ambassador to the Holy See for a scolding. *Avvenire*, the daily of the Italian bishops' conference, noted that the Belgian police nicknamed the raids "Operation Church," asserting that the tag confirms that the real target was not individual guilty parties but the church itself.

The Belgian press took the lead in firing back. The Flemish daily *De Morgen*, for example, applauded the "clear signal" sent by the police: "The church is not above the law." The leading French language daily *Le Soir* charged that the Vatican "prefers the tombs to the victims," and said that the justice system was well within its rights to seek out clergy guilty of abuse.

The ferocity reflects the unique atmosphere in Belgium vis-à-vis both pedophilia and the Catholic church.

In the mid-1990s, a massive national pedophilia scandal erupted when four young girls were found dead at the house of Marc Dutroux, a previously convicted sex offender. Investigators discovered a warren of underground concrete cages beneath his house where Dutroux kept children prisoner. Eventually, the investigation suggested the existence of "pedophilia networks," involving orgies at which drugs and underage children were made available to VIP clients including, allegedly, politicians, judges and police.

A 15-month parliamentary investigation, which ended in 1998, found massive incompetence and corruption in the way authorities had handled complaints of sexual exploitation of children. According to most observers in Belgium, the experience left the country scarred, distrustful of its institutions, and a widespread attitude of "never again" regarding the sexual abuse of children.

While a police raid may have been unthinkable in a traditional Catholic country such as Belgium as recently as a quarter-century ago, those days seem to be over. Today, the Belgian church in many ways appears a shadow of its former self.

A 2008 study by Leuven University, for example, found that only about seven percent of Belgian Catholics attend Mass on a weekly basis, down from 11 percent a decade earlier. Only half of newborn children in Belgium today are baptized, the same study found, and only one-quarter of couples in Belgium today choose to be married in the church.

Ambivalence about the Catholic church, and the Vatican in particular, can be glimpsed from the way Belgium responded to the controversy last year over Benedict XVI's remarks en route to Africa to the effect that condoms make the problem of AIDS worse. While those words triggered wide debate, only in Belgium did the national parliament formally vote to censure the pontiff.

The vote in favor of a declaration calling the pope's comments "unacceptable" was 95 to 18, with seven abstentions.

Benedict's choice of Léonard, 70, to replace Danneels further aggravated backlash against the church in some quarters. Deputy Prime Minister Laurette Onkelinx, a leading French-speaking member of the Socialist Party, charged that Léonard's staunch ethical traditionalism would endanger the "Belgian compromise" between believers and secularists — an informal "live and let live" agreement to avoid open cultural war. For much the same reason, *Le Soir* called the appointment "stupefying."

Last week's police raids, in other words, didn't drop from the clear blue sky. They reflect a national concern for child welfare, coupled with a weakened local Catholic church and an atmosphere in which the Vatican, and the pope, aren't likely to get the benefit of the doubt.

All that makes Belgium a place well worth watching as the sexual abuse crisis continues to play out.

[John Allen is NCR senior correspondent. His e-mail address is jallen@ncronline.org [1].]

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