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Cardinal's lawyer gives context to leaked tapes

by NCR Staff



Cardinal Godfried Danneels (CNS 2007 file photo)

Media portrayals of retired Belgian Cardinal Godfried Danneels' meeting with a sex abuse victim, the victim's family and the abuser, Bishop Roger Vangheluwe of Brugge, Belgium, have not given a complete picture of what transpired, says the lawyer representing Cardinal Danneels.

To counter the misrepresentations in the media, Fernand Keuleneer, Danneels' attorney, issued the following statement Aug. 30:

About Cardinal Danneels' failed attempt at reconciliation within the Vangheluwe family

On Saturday August 28, the Belgian newspaper *De Standaard* committed a character assassination on Cardinal Godfried Danneels (77), the retired archbishop of Mechelen ? Brussels. *De Standaard* published (a part only of) the transcript of the tapes which had been secretly recorded during a confidential, improvised and failed reconciliation attempt with the Vangheluwe family, which the Cardinal acquiesced to undertake on April 8, 2010, *De Standaard* put certain paragraphs in red and

moreover added extremely biased commentary.

Almost everyone agrees that legally, the Cardinal did nothing wrong. We moreover consider the Cardinal has acted in a morally irreproachable way.

In the beginning of April 2010, Cardinal Danneels receives a telephone call from his former colleague (as a bishop, for a quarter of a century) and friend Mgr. Roger Vangheluwe, then still bishop of Bruges. At the outset of the conversation, Mgr. Vangheluwe immediately informs the Cardinal that he has committed a heinous act: as of 1973, he had been sexually abusing his own nephew. The abuse continues until 1986, when the victim's father confronts his brother. The discussion between former colleagues takes no more than a few minutes. As anybody in a similar situation would be, the Cardinal is shocked and can barely respond.

Only a few days later, on April 8, 2010, the catholic association of senior citizens "OKRA" organizes a large meeting in Bruges. The Cardinal is a guest of honour and receives ? at the occasion of his own retirement ? a honorary membership. Mgr. Vangheluwe is also present and approaches the Cardinal. He requests the Cardinal to attend and facilitate a meeting between himself and his family. The Cardinal is reluctant and says he prefers another date. He asks his former colleague to call his family. Mgr. Vangheluwe does so, and tells the Cardinal that his family is already on its way and that it would be good for them to have the conversation. If the Cardinal has been naïve, it is at this point, when accepting the request to mediate. But it would be a very cynical position to hold against Cardinal Danneels the fact that he opted to attempt a reconciliation in a family tragedy, and in doing so, exposed himself to potential negative press coverage, rather than choosing the easy way out by shifting the problem to the papal nuncio.

Around 03.00 p.m. the victim arrives with a number of relatives.

The Cardinal is unprepared for what follows. He assumes his role is to mediate in a family drama which took place between 1973 and 1986, which has been kept a family secret for the following twenty-four years and which has continued to fester, and for which a reconciliation and some form of repair may be possible. This is moreover what at least some of the family members wish for ? and this preferably without a public scandal, which, as the Cardinal very correctly pointed out, would be in nobody's interest.

Mgr. Vangheluwe's nephew however expected that attending a meeting with "the Cardinal" in the presence of his family, would give him the opportunity to address the "employer" of his uncle: somebody in a position to dismiss his uncle as a bishop. It also becomes clear that Mgr. Vangheluwe's nephew expected Mgr. Léonard (the newly appointed archbishop of Mechelen ? Brussels) to attend. This is not the case, and the Cardinal informs Mgr. Vangheluwe's nephew from in the beginning and very clearly that he has retired and has no authority whatsoever. His sole role is to mediate and advise. He does suggest to arrange a meeting with Mgr. Léonard if that is desired.

Not once during the meeting does the Cardinal exert any form of pressure on the abuse victim. At multiple instances the Cardinal asks what the victim wants to be done. The victim answers: I put it in "your" (plural) hands. The Cardinal asks the victim whether he wants the matter to be publicized. Again, the victim answers: I leave it up to "you" (plural). The Cardinal asks whether Mgr. Vangheluwe should resign. The victim replies: "but he should decide that", and that "for today", he desires Mgr. Vangheluwe to openly confess in front of the entire family.

Cardinal Danneels causes Mgr. Vangheluwe, for the first time in twenty-four years, to admit his

guilt in front of his entire family, to apologize and to beg forgiveness. Whoever considers this a meaningless or unimportant event, is wrong.

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At the explicit and repeated request of the victim, Cardinal Danneels suggests various alternatives, which take into account not only the victim whose life has been destroyed, but also his family who has suffered along with the victim as well as, indeed, the perpetrator who in Christian eyes remains a human being. The Cardinal proposes that Mgr. Vangheluwe would disappear as much as possible from public life during the following year, and would then immediately resign upon reaching the retirement age (often bishops stay in their position for a few more years). This would avoid the press asking questions: none of the persons involved ? including the victim ? are eager for a public family scandal. Once more: the abuse victim and his family had been aware of the abuse for twenty-four years and have during this period never attempted to contact either the press or the police.

It is true that the Cardinal has also proposed forgiveness as a part of a conceivable solution.

One could consider this a hopelessly naïve or an outdated pastoral remedy. This is not so. Forgiveness indeed is the Catholic and moreover correct answer towards a repenting sinner. An abuse victim who is able to forgive ? after penance and repair by the offender of whatever that still can be repaired ? is a happier individual in comparison to a victim who merely scored in court or who only received financial compensation. Forgiveness and reconciliation are there not only for those who receive forgiveness but also for those who grant forgiveness. The solutions proposed by the Cardinal are potentially substantially more effective than their alternatives ? that is, if such alternatives existed, which is not the case since it is not the role of a mediator in a confidential discussion to inform or alert any third party and since anyhow, no legal recourse or remedies were still available, neither from a canon law nor from a civil law perspective.

The conversation turns, at many instances, into a painful family dispute. This is not reflected in De Standaard, which has not published the entirety of the conversation. Near the end, the Cardinal mentions that in his opinion, the conversation remains unfinished and that the issues should be revisited. He leaves the meeting with the understanding that all involved shall take some time for reflection, and that another meeting would follow in order to see whether the peace in the family could be restored. Such a second meeting never takes place: within days after the first meeting, Mgr. Vangheluwe by telephone informs the Cardinal he has tendered his resignation in writing to the papal nuncio.

Finally: the justification for publishing a part of the conversations which took place is apparently that the abuse victim had been accused of blackmailing the former bishop of Bruges to acquire a financial gain. Whether this accusation is correct or not, it is not the Cardinal who spread this rumour, and it remains completely unclear how destroying one reputation can repair the tarnishing of another one.

Brussels, August 30 2010

Fernand Keuleneer
Attorney of Cardinal Godfried Danneels

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