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John Paul's secretary says it was mistake to meet Legionary founder

by Cindy Wooden by Catholic News Service

Vatican City — Blessed John Paul II's 2004 meeting with and praise of the founder of the Legionaries of Christ -- who later was banished to a life of penance because of sexual abuse -- was a mistake, said the late pope's longtime secretary.

"The Holy Father should not have received that individual," said Polish Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz of Krakow, who served as personal secretary to the pope for 39 years.

In a new book, *Ho Vissuto con un Santo*, ("I Lived with a Saint"), released in early November, Dziwisz said the meeting was just one example of a serious lack of communication in the Roman Curia, which Pope John Paul tried, largely without success, to reform.

Although rumors had been circulating for years that the Legionaries' founder, Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, had sexually abused seminarians, Dziwisz said, "When the Holy Father met him, he knew nothing, absolutely nothing. For him, he was still the founder of a great religious order and that's it. No one had told him anything, not even about the rumors going around."

"Unfortunately," the cardinal said, "it was the consequence of a still extremely bureaucratic structure" where important information was not always shared.

A similar lack of communication, he said, led to retired Pope Benedict XVI lifting the excommunication of traditionalist Bishop Richard Williamson in 2009 before finding out the bishop was a Holocaust denier when "it would have been enough to check the Internet" to discover it.

After Pope John Paul was elected in 1978 -- the first non-Italian pope in more than 450 years -- he said,

"some in the Curia called him 'the Polish pope,' and I don't think they meant it in a positive way."

The late pope tried to reform the Curia, but did not succeed, Dziwisz said. "Maybe the Curia wasn't ready to accept a reform that would return it to an effective function of service to the pope and the bishops, and, therefore, to being an authentic instrument of communion between the Holy See and local churches."

Dziwisz, who participated in the conclave that elected Pope Francis in March, said in their pre-conclave meetings, the cardinals discussed the urgent need to reform the Curia. Pope Francis "already has made important decisions and launched a series of initiatives that are sure to bring big changes to the curial structure and to relations between the Roman Curia and the local churches," he said.

The Polish cardinal also addressed criticisms by victims of clerical sexual abuse and some media, who believe Pope John Paul did not do enough to protect victims and punish guilty priests. In the book, presented as a "conversation" with Italian journalist Gian Franco Svidercoschi, Dziwisz said, "from the moment the scandal erupted, especially in the United States, there was perfect agreement between John Paul II and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in confronting the problem" and in deciding to transfer the cases from local dioceses to the congregation.

"I find it insulting -- I repeat, insulting," Dziwisz said, "that some people continue to put John Paul II and Cardinal Ratzinger -- first as congregation prefect, then as pope -- in opposition on this question, attributing to one or the other a desire to cover up this horrible plague."

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Dziwisz not only served as the pope's personal secretary throughout his almost 27-year pontificate, but was his secretary in Krakow, had been a student of the then-Fr. Karol Wojtyla in the seminary and was ordained to the priesthood by him in 1963.

"I was convinced he was a saint from the moment Father Wojtyla was my seminary professor," he said. "This conviction was reinforced with the passage of time, living alongside him first in Krakow, then at the Vatican."

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