

Did Ratzinger mishandle Wisconsin case? Accused priest continued to work with children: Accused priest continued to work with children

News in the [April 20, 2010](#) issue

American victims of clerical sexual abuse protested at the Vatican after a *New York Times* article detailed letters and documents suggesting that Pope Benedict XVI, before becoming pope, personally mishandled the case of a Wisconsin priest who molested up to 200 deaf boys more than 35 years ago.

“What the pope will not admit is what he knew and the Vatican knew,” said John Pilmaier, Milwaukee leader of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, in interviews near St. Peter’s Square. Pilmaier and three other SNAP members drew attention to the case of Lawrence C. Murphy, the subject of a March 25 *Times* article.

Murphy, who died in 1998, resigned in 1974 as director of a Catholic school for the deaf in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, following accusations that he had molested students over his two dozen years on the staff. The priest received no further pastoral assignments, yet continued to work with children. Though allegations were apparently reported to the police, Murphy was never prosecuted.

In 1996, then-archbishop Rembert Weakland of Milwaukee referred Murphy’s case to the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, writing that he had learned recently that Murphy might have approached some of his victims in the confessional, a violation normally under the CDF’s jurisdiction.

Pope Benedict, then known as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, headed the CDF at that point and second in command was Archbishop Tarcisio Bertone, now the Vatican secretary of state. Wisconsin church officials moved to try Murphy under church law, a process that could have led to his defrocking. But in January 1998 the accused asked Ratzinger to call off the trial.

Saying he was 72, “in poor health” and had “repented of any of my past transgressions,” Murphy asked to be allowed to “live out the time that I have left in the dignity of my priesthood.” Later that year, Bertone told Wisconsin church authorities to end judicial proceedings against Murphy.

The Vatican’s actions in the Murphy case appear consistent with its recent statements. A Catholic official investigating clerical sexual abuse told an Italian newspaper that his office has rejected 60 percent of the submitted cases, “above all because of the advanced age of the accused.”

Reacting to the *Times* article, the official Vatican newspaper *L’Osservatore Romano* headlined its story: “No Cover-up.” Avowing the “transparency, firmness and severity” of the pope’s approach to abuse, the paper denounced the media’s “obvious and ignoble intention of striking, at all costs, at Benedict XVI and his closest collaborators.” -*Religion News Service*