

# Vatican seeks to be 'ally' with victims on abuse

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) The Vatican's top spokesman appealed to victims of pedophile priests who demonstrated near the Vatican on Sunday (Oct. 31) to regard the Catholic Church as an "ally" in the struggle against the sexual abuse of children.

Following a private meeting with the spokesman, however, protest leaders expressed only frustration and disappointment.

Scores of sex abuse victims from as many as a dozen countries gathered in Rome on Sunday evening to protest the Roman Catholic Church's record on child protection and outreach to victims of pedophile priests.

The event was billed as "Reformation Day" and scheduled for the anniversary of the 1517 protest by Martin Luther that set off the Protestant Reformation.

Barred by Vatican policy from demonstrating in St. Peter's Square, the protestors assembled outside Castel Sant'Angelo about half a mile away. Organizers claimed to have drawn well over 100 participants, though some observers counted as few as 60.

The largest contingent was of former students from a school for the

deaf in Verona, Italy, who claimed to have been raped by a priest there in the 1960s.

Participants wore t-shirts bearing the word "Enough!" in English, German and Italian, and carried signs with slogans including "Shame" and "Hands off children." Later, they lit candles and observed a minute of silence for all survivors of sex abuse.

Shortly before the scheduled start of the rally, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, director of the Holy See Press Office, approached the group intending to read a statement calling on them to "look at the church ever more ... as an ally already active today in the pursuit of the most noble goals of your endeavors."

When protestors greeted him with derisive shouts and whistles, Lombardi left without reading the statement, but offered to meet with representatives at his office across the street.

After speeches by Bernie McDaid and Gary Bergeron of the Massachusetts-based group Survivor's Voice, the protestors attempted to march to the Vatican itself but were stopped by police. McDaid was part of the first group of sex abuse victims ever to meet privately with a pope, during Pope Benedict XVI's visit to the U.S. in April 2008.

Bergeron and another protestor, Paula Leerschool of the Netherlands, were permitted to proceed under police escort to the Apostolic Palace, which houses the residence and office of Pope Benedict XVI, where they left dozens of letters from sex abuse victims in various countries. They then placed a few small stones at the base of the obelisk in St. Peter's Square, as a symbolic trail marker for other sex abuse victims.

Bergeron, McDaid and six others, including victims and family members, met with Lombardi in his office for about an hour after the rally.

"He was basically honest enough to admit that he didn't know what to do and didn't have the power to do anything," McDaid said. "We soon realized we were getting nowhere."