

# Prominent priest apologizes for controversial sex abuse remarks

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NEW YORK (RNS) The Rev. Benedict Groeschel, a popular Franciscan friar who defended priests who sexually abuse children and blamed some victims for "seducing" them, has apologized for the controversial remarks.

Groeschel, 78, said in a statement released late Thursday (Aug. 30) that he blamed his failing health for the way he phrased the comments.

"My mind and my way of expressing myself are not as clear as they used to be," said Groeschel, who, with his hooded gray Capuchin habit and long white beard, is a familiar figure on conservative Catholic media.

"I did not intend to blame the victim," he said. "A priest (or anyone else) who abuses a minor is always wrong and is always responsible."

Groeschel's community, the Franciscan Friars of Renewal, a conservative order that he founded 25 years ago in New York, also apologized for the remarks and called them "inappropriate and untrue." The friars added that the comments "were completely out of character" for Groeschel and resulted from infirmities stemming from a car accident several years ago and a recent stroke.

"In recent months his health, memory and cognitive ability have been failing," the friars said. "He has been in and out of the hospital. Due to his declining health and

inability to care for himself, Fr. Benedict had moved to a location where he could rest and be relieved of his responsibilities."

Other members of the order confirmed that Groeschel, who for decades was an influential author and speaker who frequently appeared on the conservative Catholic cable station EWTN, was unlikely to be making any more public appearances.

The apologies followed a rapid series of developments following the publication of an interview with Groeschel in the National Catholic Register, a conservative newspaper that EWTN purchased last year from the scandal-tarred Legion of Christ order.

Groeschel had told the Register that priests who sexually abuse children "on their first offense" should not go to jail, and he added that in "a lot of cases" the child is "the seducer."

He also expressed sympathy for Jerry Sandusky, the former Penn State assistant football coach who was convicted in June of 45 counts of child sexual abuse in a scandal that rocked college football and dominated the news much as the clergy crisis has.

Groeschel's comments quickly sparked outrage and were taken down from the website of the Register, replaced by an apology from the paper's editor.

Earlier Thursday, a spokesman for New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, a longtime friend of Groeschel, also issued a sharp denunciation of the priest's comments.