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Vatican Declined to Defrock U.S. Priest Who Abused Boys

By [LAURIE GOODSTEIN](#)

Top Vatican officials — including the future [Pope Benedict XVI](#) — did not defrock a priest who molested as many as 200 deaf boys, even though several American bishops repeatedly warned them that failure to act on the matter could embarrass the church, according to church files newly unearthed as part of a lawsuit.

The internal correspondence from bishops in Wisconsin directly to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the future pope, shows that while church officials tussled over whether the priest should be dismissed, their highest priority was protecting the church from scandal.

The documents emerge as Pope Benedict is facing other accusations that he and direct subordinates often did not alert civilian authorities or discipline priests involved in sexual abuse when he served as an archbishop in Germany and as the [Vatican](#)'s chief doctrinal enforcer.

The Wisconsin case involved an American priest, the Rev. Lawrence C. Murphy, who worked at a renowned school for deaf children from 1950 to 1974. But it is only one of thousands of cases forwarded over decades by bishops to the Vatican office called the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, led from 1981 to 2005 by Cardinal Ratzinger. It is still the office that decides whether accused priests should be given full canonical trials and defrocked.

In 1996, Cardinal Ratzinger failed to respond to [two letters about the case](#) from [Rembert G. Weakland](#), Milwaukee's archbishop at the time. After eight months, the second in command at the doctrinal office, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, now the Vatican's secretary of state, [instructed the Wisconsin bishops to begin a secret canonical trial](#) that could lead to Father Murphy's dismissal.

But Cardinal Bertone halted the process after [Father Murphy personally wrote to Cardinal Ratzinger](#) protesting that he should not be put on trial because he had already repented and was in poor health and that the case was beyond the church's own statute of limitations.

"I simply want to live out the time that I have left in the dignity of my priesthood," Father Murphy wrote near the end of his life to Cardinal Ratzinger. "I ask your kind assistance in this matter." The files contain no response from Cardinal Ratzinger.

The New York Times obtained the documents, which the church fought to keep secret, from Jeff Anderson and Mike Finnegan, the lawyers for five men who have brought four lawsuits against the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. The documents include letters between bishops and the Vatican, victims' affidavits, [the handwritten notes of an expert on sexual disorders who interviewed Father Murphy](#) and [minutes of a final meeting on the case](#) at the Vatican.

Father Murphy not only was never tried or disciplined by the church's own justice system, but also got a pass from the police and prosecutors who ignored reports from his victims, according to the documents and interviews with victims. Three successive archbishops in Wisconsin were told that Father Murphy was sexually abusing children, the documents show, but never reported it to criminal or civil authorities.

Instead of being disciplined, [Father Murphy was quietly moved](#) by [Archbishop William E. Cousins](#) of Milwaukee to the Diocese of Superior in northern Wisconsin in 1974, where he spent his last 24 years working freely with children in parishes, schools and, as one lawsuit charges, a juvenile detention center. He died in 1998, still a priest.

Even as the pope himself in a recent letter to Irish Catholics has emphasized the need to cooperate with civil justice in abuse cases, the correspondence seems to indicate that the Vatican's insistence on secrecy has often impeded such cooperation. At the same time, the officials' reluctance to defrock a sex abuser shows that on a doctrinal level, the Vatican has tended to view the matter in terms of sin and repentance more than crime and punishment.

The Vatican spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, was shown the documents and was asked to respond to questions about the case. He [provided a statement](#) saying that Father Murphy had certainly violated "particularly vulnerable" children and the law, and that it was a "tragic case." But he pointed out that the Vatican was not forwarded the case until 1996, years after civil authorities had investigated the case and dropped it.

Father Lombardi emphasized that neither the Code of Canon Law nor the [Vatican norms issued in 1962](#), which instruct bishops to conduct canonical investigations and trials in secret, prohibited church officials from reporting child abuse to civil authorities. He did not address why that had never happened in this case.

As to why Father Murphy was never defrocked, he said that "the Code of Canon Law does not envision automatic penalties." He said that Father Murphy's poor health and the lack of more recent accusations against him were factors in the decision.

The Vatican's inaction is not unusual. Only 20 percent of the 3,000 accused priests whose cases went to the church's doctrinal office between 2001 and 2010 were given full church trials, and only some of those were defrocked, according to a recent interview in an Italian newspaper with Msgr. Charles J. Scicluna, the chief internal prosecutor at that office. An additional 10 percent were defrocked immediately. Ten percent left voluntarily. But a majority — 60 percent — faced other "administrative and disciplinary provisions," Monsignor Scicluna said, like being prohibited from celebrating Mass.

To many, Father Murphy appeared to be a saint: a hearing man gifted at communicating in American Sign Language and an effective fund-raiser for deaf causes. A priest of the Milwaukee Archdiocese, he started as a teacher at St. John's School for the Deaf, in St. Francis, in 1950. He was promoted to run the school in 1963 even though students had disclosed to church officials in the 1950s that he was a predator.

Victims give [similar accounts of Father Murphy's pulling down their pants and touching them](#) in his office, his car, his mother's country house, on class excursions and fund-raising trips and in their dormitory beds at night. [Arthur Budzinski](#) said he was first molested when he went to Father Murphy for confession when he was about 12, in 1960.

"If he was a real mean guy, I would have stayed away," said Mr. Budzinski, now 61, who worked for years as a journeyman printer. "But he was so friendly, and so nice and understanding. I knew he was wrong, but I couldn't really believe it."

Mr. Budzinski and a group of other deaf former students spent more than 30 years trying to raise the alarm, including passing out leaflets outside the Milwaukee cathedral. Mr. Budzinski's friend Gary Smith said in an interview that Father Murphy molested him 50 or 60 times, starting at age 12. By the time he graduated from high school at St. John's, Mr. Smith said, "I was a very, very angry man."

In 1993, with complaints about Father Murphy landing on his desk, Archbishop Weakland hired a social worker specializing in treating sexual offenders to evaluate him. After four days of interviews, the social worker said that Father Murphy had admitted his acts, had probably molested about 200 boys and felt no remorse.

However, it was not until 1996 that Archbishop Weakland tried to have Father Murphy defrocked. The reason, he wrote to Cardinal Ratzinger, was to defuse the anger among the deaf and restore their trust in the church. He wrote that since he had become aware that "solicitation in the confessional might be part of the situation," the case belonged at the doctrinal office.

With no response from Cardinal Ratzinger, Archbishop Weakland wrote a different Vatican office in March 1997 saying the matter was urgent because a lawyer was preparing to sue, the case could become public and "true scandal in the future seems very possible."

Recently some bishops have argued that the 1962 norms dictating secret disciplinary procedures have long fallen out of use. But it is clear from these documents that in 1997, they were still in force.

But the effort to dismiss Father Murphy came to a sudden halt after the priest appealed to Cardinal Ratzinger for leniency.

In an interview, Archbishop Weakland said that [he recalled a final meeting at the Vatican in May 1998](#) in which he failed to persuade Cardinal Bertone and other doctrinal officials to grant a canonical trial to defrock Father Murphy. (In 2002, Archbishop Weakland resigned after it became public that he had an affair with a man and used church money to pay him a settlement.)

Archbishop Weakland said this week in an interview, “The evidence was so complete, and so extensive that I thought he should be reduced to the lay state, and also that that would bring a certain amount of peace in the deaf community.”

Father Murphy died four months later at age 72 and was buried in his priestly vestments. Archbishop Weakland wrote a last letter to Cardinal Bertone explaining his regret that Father Murphy’s family had disobeyed the archbishop’s instructions that the funeral be small and private, and the coffin kept closed.

“In spite of these difficulties,” Archbishop Weakland wrote, “we are still hoping we can avoid undue publicity that would be negative toward the church.”

Rachel Donadio contributed reporting from Rome.