

Rome priest on trial for abuse in Vatican backyard

By NICOLE WINFIELD (AP) - 6 days ago

ROME — The bishop responsible for a politically connected priest accused of molesting seven boys has admitted in court papers obtained by The Associated Press that he knew of the allegations for two years but didn't remove the priest from working with children.

The case of Rev. Ruggero Conti, who once advised Rome's mayor on family policy issues, resumes in court on Tuesday after a several-week break as attention increasingly turns to clerical sex abuse in the Vatican's backyard.

A week after Pope Benedict XVI wept with victims of clerical sex abuse in Malta and promised everything in the church's power to protect children and bring abusers to justice, Italian victims are now seeking a papal audience.

And Benedict on Sunday indirectly acknowledged that Italy has had its fair share of cases by praising the work of an Italian anti-pedophilia group headed by a Sicilian priest, Don Fortunato di Noto. The pope said he wanted to "encourage all those who are dedicated to prevention and education."

But casting a harsher spotlight on abusive priests in Italy is the court date Tuesday for Conti, who is on trial in Rome for allegedly molesting seven young boys at the Nativita' di Santa Maria Santissima parish in a working class neighborhood of the capital.

Conti has denied in court that he abused any of the boys. But he has admitted that he was fond of them, saying that he would cuddle or pat them — using the Italian word "coccole," which implies paternal affection.

"I can only think that these boys had a distorted interpretation, that their stories have crossed," Conti said during a 2008 hearing.

In police interrogations, the boys — some as young as 13 at the time of the alleged abuse — said that Conti would masturbate them and force them to perform oral sex on him in his home where he frequently invited them to eat dinner and watch movies.

Conti's bishop, Monsignor Gino Reali, admitted in a prosecutors' interrogation obtained by the AP that he knew of vague accusations two years before Conti was arrested by police, yet didn't remove him from pastoral work or otherwise report him to authorities.

Conti was arrested June 30, 2008 — as he prepared to travel with youths from his parish to World Youth Day in Sydney, Australia — and is on trial on charges of sexual violence and prostitution.

The Conti trial is being closely watched as the clerical abuse scandal swirls around the Vatican since it involves a priest who was so well regarded that he served as a family policy adviser to Rome Mayor Gianni Alemanno during his 2008 mayoral election campaign.

The Vatican's sex crimes prosecutor, Monsignor Charles Scicluna, has acknowledged he learned about the case in July 2007, a year before the arrest, when an anti-pedophilia group met with him seeking advice on how to proceed against him. Scicluna has said he advised the group, Caramella Buona ("the good candy"), to go to police, which they did.

In the December, 2008 interrogation Reali admitted that he first heard about the accusations from Conti himself in September 2006. He said he continued to hear reports, including from a youth who told him that he had been molested by Conti during a summer retreat. At a certain point Conti asked to leave the parish, but returned.

Reali said he asked Conti if there was any foundation to the reports, and said the priest denied there was any basis to them. Reali said he told Conti not to let boys visit his home but acknowledged he wasn't in a position to enforce such a measure.

Pressed by Prosecutor Francesco Scavo why he didn't pursue the case even after one of Conti's colleagues complained, Reali responded: "Yes, they're serious facts, but it's not like I can do an investigation of this type unless there's a precise complaint."

"You know that there are so many 'rumors,'" Reali continued. "And I can't run after each one of them."

Attorney Nino Marazzita, who is representing two of the youths in the trial, has said he plans to put Reali on the stand. If Reali testifies he knew of the abuse yet didn't take measures to report it to police or his superiors, that could constitute aiding and abetting a crime, the lawyer said.

"Silence is always a form of moral complicity," he told reporters last week.

Reali's office has declined repeated requests for comment.

Reali also admitted in the interrogation that in 2005 he sent back to Spain a priest who had been accused by some parents of sending explicit text messages to young boys. The Spanish diocese of Getafe, outside Madrid, has said it wasn't informed in advance of the Rev. Jose Poveda Sanchez's problems in Italy.

The Getafe diocese said it learned of the probe in 2008 from the priest himself, and transferred him to work at a nursing home in Aranjuez.

As the Conti case continues, an Italian anti-pedophilia group, Prometeo, has asked for an audience with Benedict so he can meet with Italian victims of abuse. Benedict has met with U.S., Australian, Canadian and Maltese victims.

"The time has come for them (the Vatican) to take seriously the enormity of the phenomenon, healing the wounds of the past and preventing new ones from opening," the group's head

Massimiliano Frassi said in a statement.

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