

UPDATE: Retired pope asks forgiveness in response to Munich abuse report

VATICAN CITY (CNS) – At the age of 94, retired Pope Benedict XVI said he knows he will soon stand before God’s judgment and he prayed that he would be forgiven for his shortcomings, including in handling allegations of clerical sexual abuse.

“Even though, as I look back on my long life, I can have great reason for fear and trembling, I am nonetheless of good cheer, for I trust firmly that the Lord is not only the just judge, but also the friend and brother who himself has already suffered for my shortcomings, and is thus also my advocate,” he said.

In response on Feb. 8 to a recent report on sexual abuse cases in the German Archdiocese of Munich and Freising, Pope Benedict also confirmed that an error in the testimony written on his behalf had been an oversight and “was not intentionally willed and I hope may be excused.”

“To me it proved deeply hurtful that this oversight was used to cast doubt on my truthfulness, and even to label me a liar,” he said in a letter released on Feb. 8 by the Vatican.

However, the retired pope, who headed the Munich Archdiocese from 1977 to 1982, emphasized his feelings of great shame and sorrow for the abuse of minors and made a request for forgiveness to all victims of sexual abuse.

“I have had great responsibilities in the Catholic Church. All the greater is my pain for the abuses and the errors that occurred in those different places during the time of my mandate,” Pope Benedict wrote.

“Each individual case of sexual abuse is appalling and irreparable,” he said. “The victims of sexual abuse have my deepest sympathy, and I feel great sorrow for each individual case.”

The letter comes after a German law firm released a report in late January on how abuse cases were handled in the Archdiocese of Munich and Freising.

The report, compiled at the request of the archdiocese, incriminated retired Pope Benedict, with lawyers accusing him of misconduct in four cases during his tenure in Munich. Lawyer Martin Pusch of the law firm Westpfahl Spilker Wastl said the retired pope had denied wrongdoing in all cases.

The Munich investigation followed two years of research and covered the period from 1945 to 2019, centering on who knew what about sexual abuse and when, and what action they took if any. The report – made up of four volumes with almost 1,900 pages – identified at least 497 victims and 235 abusers.

Pope Benedict had submitted an 82-page written statement to the panel conducting the investigation, and, in it, the former pope had said he did not take part in a meeting in 1980 on the case of the repeat offender Peter H., who came to Munich from Essen.

The retired pope amended that statement after the report came out, saying he was present at the 1980 meeting, but the meeting focused only on finding housing for Peter H. while he underwent therapy; the priest’s abusive history was not discussed, he said.

That statement, issued Jan. 24 on Pope Benedict’s behalf by his secretary, Archbishop Georg Ganswein, said the error of incorrectly stating the retired pope had not been at the meeting “was not done out of bad faith but was the result of an oversight in the editing of his statement.”

In his Feb. 8 response, the retired pope said there was a "small group of friends who selflessly compiled on my behalf my 82-page testimony for the Munich law firm, which I would have been unable to write by myself."

"In addition to responding to the questions posed by the law firm, this also demanded reading and analyzing almost 8,000 pages of documents in digital format. These assistants then helped me to study and analyze the almost 2,000 pages of expert opinions," he wrote, adding that those results were published as an appendix to his letter.

He said that during this "massive" amount of work in establishing his position, "an oversight occurred regarding my participation in the chancery meeting of 15 January 1980. This error, which regrettably was verified, was not intentionally willed and I hope may be excused."

This error should not "detract from the care and diligence" with which his friends helped formulate his response, he said.

And while it was "deeply hurtful" for the oversight to have been used to cast doubt on him, Pope Benedict wrote, "I have been greatly moved by the varied expressions of trust, the heartfelt testimonies and the moving letters of encouragement sent to me by so many persons."

He dedicated the rest of his two-page letter to the importance of "confession," noting that each day at the beginning of Mass "we publicly implore the living God to forgive" the sins committed through "our fault, through our most grievous fault."

"It is clear to me that the words 'most grievous' do not apply each day and to every person in the same way," he wrote. "They tell me with consolation that, however great my fault may be today, the Lord forgives me, if I sincerely allow myself to be examined by him and am really prepared to change."

He said that he has “come to understand that we ourselves are drawn into this grievous fault whenever we neglect it or fail to confront it with the necessary decisiveness and responsibility, as too often happened and continues to happen.”

“Once again I can only express to all the victims of sexual abuse my profound shame, my deep sorrow and my heartfelt request for forgiveness,” he said.

Together with the pope’s letter, the Vatican published an “analysis” of the Munich report’s assessment that then-Cardinal Ratzinger allegedly mishandled abuse allegations on four occasions when he led the German archdiocese. The analysis was compiled by a small team of canon lawyers and other experts who had helped craft the original 82-page response during the initial phase of the investigation.

This team’s response focused primarily on the case of “priest X,” the serial abuser also known as Peter H. It said the Munich report’s assessment did “not correspond to the truth” because the now-retired pontiff “was neither aware that priest X was an abuser, nor that he was included in pastoral activity.”

According to the Munich report, then-Cardinal Ratzinger “employed this priest in pastoral activity, even though he was aware of the abuses committed by him, and thus would have covered up his sexual abuses.”

However, records of the key 1980 meeting indicated that sexual abuse committed by the priest was not discussed, the team said, and the reason for accommodating priest X in Munich for therapy there “was not mentioned.”

Pope Benedict did not knowingly perjure himself, as the Munich report claimed, when he initially denied being present at the 1980 meeting, the team said.

It had been a “transcription error” and Pope Benedict “did not notice” it given the time constraints, it said. The minutes of the 1980 meeting were included in statements made by then-Cardinal Ratzinger, so it would make no sense “for him to intentionally deny his presence at the meeting.”

There is also no evidence behind the report’s “allegation of misconduct or conspiracy in any cover-up,” the team said. “As an archbishop, Cardinal Ratzinger was not involved in any cover-up of acts of abuse.”

Text of retired Pope Benedict XVI’s letter on Munich abuse report

VATICAN CITY (CNS) – Here is the Vatican’s English translation of the letter retired Pope Benedict XVI published Feb. 8 in response to the independent report on the handling of sexual abuse allegations in the German Archdiocese of Munich and Freising from 1945 to 2019. The former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger led the archdiocese from 1977 to 1982.

Dear sisters and brothers,

Following the presentation of the report on abuse in the Archdiocese of Munich-Freising on 20 January last, I feel the need to address a personal word to all of you. Even though I served as archbishop of Munich and Freising for a little less than five years, I continue to feel very much a part of the Archdiocese of Munich and to consider it home.

I would like first to offer a word of heartfelt thanks. In these days marked by examination of conscience and reflection, I was able to experience greater friendship and support, and signs of trust, than I could ever have imagined. I would like to thank in particular the small group of friends who selflessly compiled on my behalf my 82-page testimony for the Munich law firm, which I would have been unable to write by myself. In addition to responding to the questions posed by

the law firm, this also demanded reading and analyzing almost 8,000 pages of documents in digital format. These assistants then helped me to study and analyze the almost 2,000 pages of expert opinions. The results will be published subsequently as an appendix to my letter.

Amid the massive work of those days – the development of my position – an oversight occurred regarding my participation in the chancery meeting of 15 January 1980. This error, which regrettably was verified, was not intentionally willed and I hope may be excused. I then arranged for Archbishop Gänswein to make it known in the press statement of 24 January last. In no way does it detract from the care and diligence that, for those friends, were and continue to be an evident and absolute imperative. To me it proved deeply hurtful that this oversight was used to cast doubt on my truthfulness, and even to label me a liar. At the same time, I have been greatly moved by the varied expressions of trust, the heartfelt testimonies and the moving letters of encouragement sent to me by so many persons. I am particularly grateful for the confidence, support and prayer that Pope Francis personally expressed to me. Lastly, I would thank the little family in the Mater Ecclesiae Monastery, whose communion of life in times of joy and sorrow has given me the interior serenity that supports me.

Now, to these words of thanks, there must necessarily also follow a confession. I am increasingly struck by the fact that day after day the church begins the celebration of holy Mass – in which the Lord gives us his word and his very self – with the confession of our sins and a petition for forgiveness. We publicly implore the living God to forgive (the sins we have committed through) our fault, through our most grievous fault. It is clear to me that the words “most grievous” do not apply each day and to every person in the same way. Yet every day they do cause me to question if today, too, I should speak of a most grievous fault. And they tell me with consolation that however great my fault may be today, the Lord forgives me, if

I sincerely allow myself to be examined by him and am really prepared to change.

In all my meetings, especially during my many apostolic journeys, with victims of sexual abuse by priests, I have seen at first hand the effects of a most grievous fault. And I have come to understand that we ourselves are drawn into this grievous fault whenever we neglect it or fail to confront it with the necessary decisiveness and responsibility, as too often happened and continues to happen. As in those meetings, once again I can only express to all the victims of sexual abuse my profound shame, my deep sorrow and my heartfelt request for forgiveness. I have had great responsibilities in the Catholic Church. All the greater is my pain for the abuses and the errors that occurred in those different places during the time of my mandate. Each individual case of sexual abuse is appalling and irreparable. The victims of sexual abuse have my deepest sympathy, and I feel great sorrow for each individual case.

I have come increasingly to appreciate the repugnance and fear that Christ felt on the Mount of Olives when he saw all the dreadful things that he would have to endure inwardly. Sadly, the fact that in those moments the disciples were asleep represents a situation that, today too, continues to take place, and for which I, too, feel called to answer. And so, I can only pray to the Lord and ask all the angels and saints, and you, dear brothers and sisters, to pray for me to the Lord our God.

Quite soon, I shall find myself before the final judge of my life. Even though, as I look back on my long life, I can have great reason for fear and trembling, I am nonetheless of good cheer, for I trust firmly that the Lord is not only the just judge, but also the friend and brother who himself has already suffered for my shortcomings, and is thus also my advocate, my 'Paraclete.' In light of the hour of judgment, the grace of being a Christian becomes all the more clear to me. It grants

me knowledge, and indeed friendship, with the judge of my life, and thus allows me to pass confidently through the dark door of death. In this regard, I am constantly reminded of what John tells us at the beginning of the Apocalypse: he sees the Son of Man in all his grandeur and falls at his feet as though dead. Yet he, placing his right hand on him, says to him: "Do not be afraid! It is I ..." (cf. Rev 1:12-17).

Dear friends, with these sentiments I bless you all.

Benedict XVI