

Belgian bishop says nephews' abuse was a 'game'

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) Belgium's Catholic bishops declared themselves "extremely shocked" on Friday (Apr. 15) by a former bishop who described the sexual abuse of two young nephews as a "game" that did not involve penetration or physical violence.

Bishop Roger Vangheluwe, who resigned a year ago as bishop of Bruges after admitting that he had sexually abused one of his young nephews, told a Flemish-language television network on Thursday (April 14) that he abused another nephew.

"I never had the impression of being a pedophile," Vangheluwe said, speaking from a Catholic retreat in France where he has been sent for treatment. "I never had the impression that my nephew was opposed (to sexual contact), rather the contrary."

"It began as a game with the boy," Vangheluwe said of the abuse with the first boy, which began when he was 5 and lasted for 13 years. "It was never a question of rape, nor of physical violence. He never saw me naked and there was never any penetration."

Vangheluwe resigned last April after his nephew, then 42, revealed the abuse. Over the next few months, Belgians filed more than 500 claims of sexual abuse by Catholic clergy.

"I was never conscious that it had such an impact on my nephew," Vangheluwe said on Thursday. "I thought we were dealing with superficial things."

Belgium's Catholic bishops' conference said in a statement on Friday that the "tone of (Vangheluwe's) interview is in total contradiction to

the efforts undertaken in the last months to take seriously the problem of sexual abuse."

Also on Friday, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, director of the Holy See Press Office, told reporters that the Vatican was "conscious of the gravity" of the matter and was preparing to launch an "in-depth evaluation."

Lombardi earlier had confirmed that Vangheluwe had been sent out of Belgium for "spiritual and psychological counseling" while the Vatican weighed his punishment, noting that "throughout this period he will obviously be forbidden from publicly exercising his priestly or episcopal functions."