

Prominent priest blames sex victims, says first-time abusers shouldn't face jail

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c. 2012 Religion News Service NEW YORK (RNS) The Rev. Benedict Groeschel, a prominent author and speaker who is especially popular with conservative Catholics and bishops, has sparked outrage by saying that priests who sexually abuse children "on their first offense" should not go to jail.

He added that in "a lot of cases," the child is "the seducer."

The New York-based Franciscan 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, in an interview published Tuesday (Aug. 28) by the National Catholic Register, spread like wildfire around the Internet after they were reported by Religion News Service, and they prompted comparisons to Missouri Senate candidate Todd Akin's controversial remarks about "legitimate rape" and abortion.

They also threatened to raise more questions about the hierarchy's response to the abuse scandal even as the bishops have been hoping to turn the corner on a decades-long scandal that has cost billions in settlements and damaged the church's moral standing.

"It's wrong to demonize children who were raped," David Clohessy, director of Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, the leading advocacy group for victims, said Thursday. "It's even worse to ignore such wrong doing."

A spokesman for New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, who was scheduled to deliver a blessing to the Republican National Convention in Tampa on Thursday night,

responded to the uproar by denouncing Groeschel's statements as "simply wrong."

"The harm that was done by these remarks was compounded by the assertion that the victim of abuse is responsible for the abuse, or somehow caused the abuse to occur," Joseph Zwillling said in a statement released by the Archdiocese of New York. Groeschel's community, the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal, is based in the Bronx. Groeschel is also an adjunct professor of pastoral psychology at the archdiocesan seminary.

"This is not only terribly wrong, it is also extremely painful for victims. To all those who are hurting because of sexual abuse or because of these comments, please know that you have our profound sympathy and our prayers."

Groeschel's comments became so radioactive so quickly that the National Catholic Register, a conservative media outlet, removed the story from its website within hours of posting it.

The Register was criticized for the move in part because until last year the newspaper was owned by the Legion of Christ. The Legion's founder, the late Rev. Marcial Maciel, was found to have been a serial child abuser who also fathered at least six children with different women and used church funds to support his lifestyle and curry favor in Rome.

For years, the Register was a vocal apologist for Maciel, a Mexican-born priest who was a longtime favorite in the Vatican, and the newspaper's writers often attacked Maciel's critics and in general played down the sexual abuse of children among clergy.

Last year, after the Vatican bowed to public pressure and launched an overhaul of the Legion of Christ, the Register was purchased by EWTN, another conservative media outlet best known for its cable television programming, and where Groeschel was a frequent guest.

In a statement posted Thursday afternoon in place of the original story, the Register's Editor in Chief, Jeanette R. De Melo, apologized for publishing the comments "without clarification or challenge."

"Child sexual abuse is never excusable," wrote De Melo, who was appointed earlier this year as part of the newspaper's overhaul. "Our publication of that comment was

an editorial mistake, for which we sincerely apologize. Given Father Benedict's stellar history over many years, we released his interview without our usual screening and oversight. We have removed the story. We have sought clarification from Father Benedict."

A spokesman for the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal, the Rev. Glenn Sudano, did not return a call for comment.

In the interview, Groeschel, a trained psychologist, said he has worked with many priests who have abused children and said they are not "psychopaths."

"Suppose you have a man having a nervous breakdown, and a youngster comes after him. A lot of the cases, the youngster -- 14, 16, 18 -- is the seducer," Groeschel said.

He said the cases were "almost romantic" and said the sexual contact often did not include penetration.

Groeschel went on to call Sandusky "this poor guy" and wondered why the victims -- the boys were often raped by Sandusky -- did not report the crimes.

"At this point, (when) any priest, any clergyman, any social worker, any teacher, any responsible person in society would become involved in a single sexual act -- not necessarily intercourse -- they're done," Groeschel added.

"And I'm inclined to think, on their first offense, they should not go to jail because their intention was not committing a crime."

Groeschel is a distinctive figure with a long white beard and the gray habit of the community of brothers he founded 25 years ago. Groeschel founded his own branch of the Franciscan Capuchins because he did not consider mainstream Franciscans sufficiently orthodox.

The friars under Groeschel have expanded since then, and Groeschel, even at 78 and having suffered several health crises, has remained a favorite of church conservatives and many influential bishops.