France probes sexual assault claim against Vatican envoy

Date: 2019-02-15

Source: https://punchng.com/france-probes-sexual-assault-claim-against-vatican-envoy/

French prosecutors said Friday they were investigating a sexual assault complaint made against the Vatican’s envoy to Paris in more unwelcome news for the Catholic church as it looks to turn the page on years of scandal.  
  
Pope Francis has vowed that the church will no longer ignore abuse allegations, and he removed two prominent cardinals from his inner circle late last year after they were tainted by paedophile scandals.  
  
The latest alleged sex scandal involves 74-year-old Luigi Ventura, Pope Francis’ envoy to France, who is accused of molesting an official at the Paris mayor’s office, a judicial source told AFP.  
  
Ventura, an archbishop, has served as apostolic nuncio to France since 2009 and is covered by diplomatic immunity.  
  
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His Paris office did not respond to a request for comment.  
  
In the past, the Vatican — in line with diplomatic custom — has recalled any representatives implicated in scandal.  
  
In 2012, for example, Polish archbishop Jozef Wesolowski was secretly recalled as papal nuncio from the Dominican Republic following reports he paid for sexual encounters with children.  
  
The Vatican refused to extradite him to Poland for trial, but an ecclesiastical court found him guilty and he was defrocked in June 2014.  
  
The Church decided to further try him on criminal charges, but he died following a cardiac arrest in August 2015 before the trial opened. He was 67.  
  
In another case however Australian Cardinal George Pell, a close aide to the pope, last year returned from the Vatican to Australia to face child sex charges.  
  
Pell was not covered by diplomatic immunity in that case.  
  
– ‘Groped on backside’ –  
  
Italian-born Ventura has been accused of molesting a man at the town hall in Paris on January 17 when Mayor Anne Hidalgo gave a New Year’s address to diplomats, religious leaders and civil society figures.  
  
“During the ceremony, a city employee was repeatedly groped on the backside, in three instances, once in front of a witness,” a town hall source told AFP.  
  
“It was quickly decided to report the matter to the public prosecutor,” said Patrick Klugman, deputy mayor responsible for international relations.  
  
The town hall filed a complaint on January 24 and an investigation was opened the next day, the judicial source said.  
  
The case involves a man in his 30s who works in the town hall’s international relations’ department.  
  
Ventura previously served in Brazil, Bolivia and Britain before being appointed papal nuncio to Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso and Niger, Chile and then Canada.  
  
Catholic clerics have been denounced in countries as far afield as Australia, Brazil, Chile, Ireland and the United States, prompting pledges from Francis to rid the church of a scourge that has done enormous damage to its standing.  
  
– Vatican meeting –  
  
The pope has summoned a Church-wide meeting next week at the Vatican to notably discuss abuse of minors by clerics.  
  
France’s Catholic Church has seen its share of scandals in recent years.  
  
On March 7, a court in Lyon is due to give its verdict in the case of Philippe Barbarin, the southeastern city’s 68-year-old archbishop, and five former aides, all of whom are accused of covering up the sexual abuse of former boy scouts by a priest.  
  
That priest, 73-year-old Bernard Preynat, was charged in 2016 with assault cases going back more than 20 years. He is expected to be tried later this year.  
  
French filmmaker Francois Ozon made a film related to the case, and a court will decide on Monday whether it can go on public release ahead of Preynat’s trial.  
  
(AFP)