



The office led by Cardinal Ratzinger, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, had actually been given authority over sexual abuse cases nearly 80 years earlier, in 1922, documents show and canon lawyers confirm.

But for the two decades he was in charge of that office, the future pope never asserted that authority, failing to act even as the cases undermined the church's credibility in the United States, Australia, Ireland and elsewhere.

Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, an outspoken auxiliary bishop emeritus from Sydney, Australia, who attended the secret meeting in 2000, said that despite numerous warnings, top Vatican officials, including Benedict, took far longer to wake up to the abuse problems than many local bishops did.

"Why did the Vatican end up so far behind the bishops out on the front line, who with all their faults, did change — they did develop," he said. "Why was the Vatican so many years behind?"

Cardinal Ratzinger, of course, had not yet become pope, a divinely ordained office not accustomed to direction from below. John Paul, his longtime superior, often dismissed allegations of pedophilia by priests as an attack on the church by its enemies. Supporters say that Cardinal Ratzinger would have preferred to take steps earlier to stanch the damage in certain cases.

But the future pope, it is now clear, was also part of a culture of nonresponsibility, denial, legalistic foot-dragging and outright obstruction. More than any top Vatican official other than John Paul, it was Cardinal Ratzinger who might have taken decisive action in the 1990s to prevent the scandal from metastasizing in country after country, growing to such proportions that it now threatens to consume his own papacy.

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