

Vatican urges Timorese Catholics to accept decision on Belo

Bishop Belo was sanctioned by the Vatican in 2019 following reports of his 'serious crimes'

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Monsignor Marco Sprizzi in this 2019 file photo. (Photo: Timor-Leste Jesuits)

The Vatican representative in [Timor-Leste](#) has urged Catholics to respect the sanctions that have been imposed on Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo for “the serious crimes” he has committed and asked them to maintain loyalty to the Church amid heated debates over the issue.

Bishop Belo's case is no longer just an accusation, but it has been decided, Monsignor Marco Sprizzi, charge d'affaires of Apostolic Nunciature in [Dili](#), said in an interview broadcast on the state television RTTL on Oct. 4

"This is a decision made and accepted by the bishop and that we just have to respect it, respect the bishop and respect the Vatican's decision," he said.

"I tell Timorese Catholics, who are so loyal to the Pope, to the Vatican, to follow Vatican guidelines, just as Bishop Belo followed Vatican guidelines. He accepted it," he said, referring to the steps the Vatican has taken regarding this case.

Sprizzi's statement came amid heated debate in the country after the Dutch newspaper *De Groene Amsterdammer* (The Green Amsterdammer) published an investigative report on the alleged sex abuse scandal of [Bishop Belo](#).

The 74-year-old Salesian bishop has sexually abused boys and bought their silence for more than 20 years, the Dutch weekly reported on Sept. 28.

Shortly after the report sparked a media storm, Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni told the press that the Vatican had imposed sanctions on Bishop Belo in 2019 when it received reports of "bishops' behavior."

Underlining the Vatican's decision, Sprizzi said, "this is the proper official position of the Holy See on this matter" because "the crimes are serious" and "it wasn't because of the Dutch newspaper article."

He also said that despite Bishop Belo being sanctioned for his crimes, the Vatican still respects his contributions to the Timor-Leste independence movement which won him Nobel Peace Prize in 1996, and that "no one can deny" it.

"We have great respect for him, for his history, for his contribution to the struggle for liberation, for his closeness to the people, especially those on the front line to defend freedom, the liberation of Timor-Leste," he said.

He also asked people not to attack the media that cover this matter, including journalists because they "only give news about what the Vatican has decided."

Sprizzi also urged Catholics to continue to show fraternity and support the Church in fighting sexual abuse which has also been demonstrated by the Timorese bishops who approved [guidelines](#) for the protection of minors and vulnerable adults.

He said the interview was meant to help people to address the issue by upholding the truth.

"I answered the interview hoping that this can contribute to bring truth, respect for all, harmony and fraternity among everyone," he told UCA News on Oct. 5.

Bishop Belo's abuse case has not made a strong buzz in Timor-Leste media; however, it has triggered heated debates on social media. Some netizens including parliamentarians have accused the international media of "a conspiracy" to tarnish the image of the Church and the state.

State news agency Tatoli quoted Antonio da Conceicao of the Democratic Party who asked the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to "address the issue with seriousness" with the Dutch Embassy "to respect the culture of the Timorese people and not foster the disagreement of the society in name of human rights and of justice."

He also called on the various international organizations operating in the country "to put the national interest above all else" and not to insult the Timorese people.

Dili-based journalist Antonio Sampaio of the Portuguese news agency Lusa who has covered the issue extensively said in a Facebook post the coverage brought him threats and intimidations.

Many have been "threatening, intimidating and attacking my professional credibility, using racist and xenophobic comments," he said.

UCA News could not reach Bishop Belo, who is believed to be in Portugal, or his alleged victims, for their comments.

The Catholic-majority nation of about 1.3 million has witnessed the trial and punishment of just one Catholic clergy for sex abuse.

Former American missionary priest [Richard Dasbach](#), 84, was jailed for 12 years last December for abusing girls in an orphanage he founded.



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