

Bishops let public opinion guide them

Clerics wary of taking unpopular stance in sex abuse crisis

ANALYSIS

By LAURIE GOODSTEIN
The New York Times

DALLAS — For many years, the nation's Roman Catholic bishops dared to stake out positions that were decidedly unpopular because they felt that on the grand American stage, it was their role to speak with a prophetic voice.

They stood against the death penalty and abortion even as polls proved that the public and even the Catholic faithful did not stand with them. They testified against the arms race while Americans applauded the Reagan administration's buildup. When Americans clamored to close the borders to immigrants, the bishops preached to open them.

Then this year, a problem that had no doubt always been festering in the church erupted into a crisis that cast the bishops in the unfamiliar role of villains. A shocking number of bishops had permitted priests who sexually abused young people, including children, to continue serving in the ministry, where some priests preyed on additional victims.

Faced with this debacle, the bishops decided at their meeting in Dallas last week that this time they could not afford to take the unpopular, countercultural course. With the public, the media and sexual abuse victims joining in a chorus for "zero tolerance" of priest offenders, the bishops relented. They voted to ban from ministry any priest involved in sexual abuse of a minor in the past, present or future.

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Bishop Joseph Galante, co-adjutor of Dallas, at the U.S. Catholic bishops' conference

member of the bishops' ad hoc committee on sexual abuse, told other bishops. "Not with a lot of wiggle words, or with being philosophers or whatever, and parsing everything. They want a clear policy that will say, 'Your children will be safe.'"

THE NEW POLICY will have immediate consequences in some Catholic communities. Priests with a history of sexual misconduct — and for some elderly priests, in their very distant past — will be pulled from the parishes, nursing homes, hospitals and programs where they may still be serving. They will be told they cannot wear their Roman collars. They will not be allowed to say Mass. They will not be allowed to baptize babies or perform weddings. Many will be sent to live out their lives in monasteries, or even confined to what amount to ecclesiastical prisons.

The victims, however, were disappointed that the bishops did not go further. They had wanted the bishops to call for defrocking all abusers.

"Priest is a title that has always been held in a great deal of respect, particularly with kids," said Phil Saviano, a sexual abuse victim and board member of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests. "By allowing child molesters to keep the title of priest, it is a dangerous precedent."

The bishops may have stopped short of calling for mandatory defrocking of all offenders because it involves a lengthy process through Vati-

can courts, and they may have more speed and autonomy to move without it, said the Rev. Thomas Reese, editor of the Jesuit magazine *America*, who attended the meeting.

Also, forcing offenders out of the priesthood was the provision that would have generated the most opposition to the bishops' policy at the Vatican, which must approve it, so perhaps the bishops felt it might have a better chance without it, Reese said.

The bishops made clear they did not relish the idea of defrocking old and feeble priests, and they could make the case, said Reese, that it is better for society for the church to confine and monitor an offender who is beyond the statute of limitations to be prosecuted than to simply put a molester out on the street.

The bishops squared the circle by redefining the terms and saying that they had indeed adopted zero tolerance by resolving not to allow any priest who had ever abused a child to work in the ministry.

While zero tolerance for anyone who violates a child may seem like the obvious thing to do, among the bishops it was quite controversial. In heated debate behind closed doors and in sessions open to the media, many bishops expressed grave doubts about its wisdom, or its consistency with church teachings on redemption and justice.

"I would argue that such a proposed policy, understandable as it may be from a public opinion perspective, is not consistent with who

we are as a faith community," said Bishop Howard Hubbard of Albany, N.Y., saying that the Catholic church teaches "forgiveness and compassion and reconciliation."

Ultimately the bishops opted for the no-mercy route despite some arguments that they should adopt an approach that acknowledges that each case is different, and that some abusers can with therapy be rehabilitated and continue to be of service. They took this step despite dreading that they must now return to their dioceses and tell 70-year-old Father X that he will have to pack up and leave his parish in shame.

MANY BISHOPS had already, in the past few months as the scandal unfolded, removed the abusive priests still serving in their dioceses, sometimes with dire consequences. Two priests have committed suicide. Now there could be more. Parishioners told that the bishop was removing their pastors have led revolts. There could be more of those, too.

"It is necessary we pass this policy at this moment, with its flaws, some of them very deep flaws indeed," Cardinal Francis George of Chicago said at the meeting. "Implementing it will involve sacrifices in ways we can't fully appreciate right now, but we have to be united around it because we will be very carefully watched."

The final vote count, 239 in favor, 13 opposed, belied the fact that there had been so many bishops with strong objections. Perhaps they heeded the exhortations of George and others to speak with one voice.

But they also took the zero tolerance route because they listened to what Catholic laypeople and sexual abuse victims said they wanted. They listened in a Dallas hotel ballroom for nearly four hours on Thursday as one speaker after another pleaded with the bishops to try to see the world as parents or as pastors whose priority is protecting children, and not as clerics whose priority is protecting priests.

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Bishops to decide on policy toward priests who abuse children

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gations in more than 115 recently filed lawsuits, all but three against the Archdiocese of Louisville.

The bishops will face unprecedented media coverage. Some observers say the allegations of abuse and cover-up pose the largest crisis in American Catholic history.

Louisville Archbishop Thomas Kelly said last week that while one meeting cannot solve that crisis, "we can go a long way toward establishing a framework of principle and practice that will help us address the problem and, above all, to protect our children."

Kelly said the bishops likely would revise the proposed policy, and he is concerned that accused priests receive due process. Overall, "my hope is it will help us to guarantee the Catholic Church will always be safe for children," he said.

Currently, each diocese sets its own policy on sexual abuse, though many use elements of a set of guidelines endorsed by the bishops in the early 1990s. Louisville's archdiocese adopted a policy in 1993.

Whatever policy the bishops approve will require final approval by the Vatican, Kelly said.

The Vatican has vetoed past actions by the bishops. It overturned guidelines adopted by the U.S. bishops in the 1990s on the teaching of theology at Catholic universities, calling them not specific enough.

The mood at the Dallas conference likely will be further darkened by recent nationwide incidents of violence involving the Catholic Church, including the suicides of two accused priests, the shooting of an accused priest in Baltimore by his alleged victim and an attempted assault on another accused priest in Boston.

As a sign of how seriously the sexual-abuse crisis has affected Kentucky, the Diocese of Lexington will go unrepresented at Dallas. Lexington Bishop J. Kendrick Williams won't attend because he faces three allegations of sexual abuse or misconduct in lawsuits filed in recent weeks against the Archdiocese of Louisville, where he formerly served as a priest. A diocesan spokesman said conference rules don't allow a substitute.

Williams strenuously denies that he ever abused anyone, but he has voluntarily taken a leave of absence in accordance with diocesan policies.

The Lexington diocese also has been named in two recent lawsuits — along with its parent Diocese of Covington — alleging sexual abuse by its priests. The Diocese of Owensboro was named in one lawsuit.

Several protest groups are expected in Dallas, including those calling for the ordination of women and greater acceptance of homosexuals. Advocates for victims of sexual abuse also will meet.

Whatever happens at Dallas will be closely watched. The U.S. Conference

of Catholic Bishops says it has approved credentials for 770 reporters, photographers and media technicians, far and away a record. In the Louisville area, Faith Channel 19 says it will broadcast conference sessions.

The national sex-abuse policy was the culmination of efforts by the Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Abuse, which has been working since March on a proposal. Committee members said they were mindful of Pope John Paul II's message on "the power of conversion" when they left open the possibility of retaining priests who previously committed one offense.

They stressed that could happen only after a rigorous committee re-

view, input from the victim and public disclosure of the offense.

Some victims' advocates have said "zero tolerance" should apply to offenses in the past as well as the future.

But Tamar Byczek of Louisville, a national board member of the Catholic group Call to Action, said zero tolerance should apply to priests who commit felonies. She said those guilty of misdemeanors — lesser criminal offenses — should have their cases weighed by a committee made up mostly of lay people. "It should not be the bishop that decides, it should be the law that decides," she said.

The national Catholic magazine America also urged the church to let

police do investigations.

"The church should report allegations of sexual abuse by priests even if the allegation is flimsy or concerns victims who are now adults," it said in a recent editorial. "It should be national policy that no priest guilty of abusing a minor should remain in priestly ministry. Any exception to this policy should require the approval of a lay board and public disclosure of the priest's past to any community to which he ministers."

Indianapolis Archbishop Daniel Buechlein said the proposed charter resembles current policies in his archdiocese and goes far toward meeting the needs of victims and the church.

Added Owensboro Bishop John J. McRath: "I certainly will look forward to the discussions that I'm sure will take place. I wouldn't say I've made my mind up, but I will be waiting to hear what reasons there are" for the proposed charter.

The Rev. Gary Hayes, pastor of St. Rose Church in Cloverport, Ky., who was himself abused as a child by a priest, said the Dallas meeting would be "only the beginning" of change.

"I hope victims, survivors and the bishops will be able to find some common ground to continue dialogue," said Hayes, president of The Linkup, a support group for victims of clergy sexual abuse.



BY PAT McDONOUGH, THE COURIER-JOURNAL

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Ann Bell, left, and Sister Teresa Tuite spoke yesterday after a prayer service in St. Catharine, Ky., organized in anticipation of the bishops' meeting to deal with sex abuse by priests.

Bishops to decide how to treat abusive priests

By PETER SMITH
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The Courier-Journal

America's Roman Catholic bishops will gather this week in Dallas to decide whether to adopt a one-strike policy that would expel priests who in the future sexually abuse children.

The proposed "charter," or national policy, also would require church officials to defrock any priest found to have abused at least two children in the past.

While some advocates for victims are calling for a "zero tolerance" policy that would expel any priest guilty of abuse, the charter proposed last week by a committee of bishops says that

some priests who in the past molested one child might deserve a second chance — after rigorous review by a committee.

The sex-abuse crisis is the only item on the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' agenda for the three-day Dallas meeting, which begins Thursday. The conference's members include the leaders of the nation's 194 regional dioceses, as well as more than 200 assistant and retired bishops.

The crisis is an issue sharply felt in Kentucky, where a bishop and more than a dozen past and present priests face abuse alle-

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