

# Cardinal says peers back 'zero tolerance' on sexual abuse

By MARYCLAIRE DALE  
Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — With Roman Catholic leaders pressured to act decisively against abusive priests, Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua of Philadelphia insisted yesterday the group was unanimously behind a "zero-tolerance" policy for abusers.

"All of the cardinals are agreed on zero tolerance, and by that I mean that we all are agreed that no priest guilty of even one act of sexual abuse of a minor will function in any ecclesial ministry or any capacity in our dioceses," Bevilacqua said before a benefit dinner with seven other U.S. cardinals last night.

Cardinal Bernard Law, who has

been under pressure in Boston to resign for his handling of an abusive priest, received a standing ovation as he entered the dinner.

The U.S. cardinals returned from this week's Vatican summit on the clerical sexual-abuse crisis struggling to build consensus for a tough approach among the nation's bishops.

Archbishop Rembert Weakland of Milwaukee, Archbishop Michael Sheehan of Santa Fe, N.M., and Archbishop Harry Flynn of St. Paul and Minneapolis added their support to a zero-tolerance policy. Flynn heads a committee developing the bishops' collective response to the scandal.

Other cardinals, including Edward Egan of New York and Francis

George of Chicago, said this week they aren't sure that Pope John Paul II called for such a policy during the Vatican meeting.

No single cardinal or bishop can enact a national policy, since each diocese is autonomous. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, at its meeting in June, is expected to vote on whether to approve a national policy that will be binding on every diocese.

Cardinal Theodore McCarrick of Washington said the church may create a national advisory panel of experts to help bishops devise policies for handling sexual abuse. He said bishops in every diocese already have committees of lay people for advice on social issues.

As they left Rome, the cardinals said they would recommend a process to defrock any priest who has become "notorious and is guilty of the serial, predatory sexual abuse of minors."

Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles said yesterday that the pope clearly endorsed zero tolerance for sexual abuse by priests. Flynn a day earlier said he supported zero tolerance, though the church might find a role for fallen priests outside "a pastoral setting."

Weakland said the Milwaukee Archdiocese is adopting a zero-tolerance policy. Credible allegations will result in the removal of the accused priest from active ministry pending the results of an archdiocese investi-

gation. Substantiated allegations will be reported to authorities.

Eight cardinals were in Philadelphia to attend a \$1,000-a-plate fundraiser for Catholic University.

Several cardinals, including Law, spoke at the event. Guests leaving the dinner said speakers made no mention of the scandal.

The Boston archdiocese has been the center of the sexual-abuse scandal after it was disclosed that the archdiocese repeatedly reassigned a priest accused of abusing children.

A spokeswoman for the Boston archdiocese denied reports that Law will be replaced and sent to the Vatican by June.

"The reports are without substance, groundless, and appear to be

pure, uncorroborated speculation," spokeswoman Donna Morrissey said.

Also yesterday:

■ Msgr. Frederick Ryan of Kingston, Mass., offered his resignation amid allegations that he molested three boys in the 1970s and '80s.

■ Church officials in New Hampshire removed two priests — one in Manchester and the other in Pelham — from their parishes amid allegations that they molested children.

■ In a letter to Bishop Wilton Gregory, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, an attorney for nearly 190 alleged victims of abuse by priests asked that some clients be allowed to meet privately with church leaders, perhaps during the June meeting.