

Egan Breaks His Silence, And Emphasizes Children

By DANIEL J. WAKIN

ROME, April 24 — For days, most of the American cardinals who met in the Vatican to discuss sexual abuse by priests spoke regularly to reporters and appeared before cameras. Cardinal Edward M. Egan of New York had not been among them.

But today Cardinal Egan broke his silence in a brief interview as he headed to the Vatican for the cardinals' closing session. He described grueling talks with the pope and other Vatican officials and repeated what cardinals have been saying — their overriding concern is the safety of children.

"What we're mainly interested in right now is how we're going to deal with these particular cases when they come forward," he said.

The prime concern, he said, is safety for young people, adding: "As far as the Archdiocese of New York is concerned, my focus is on that overriding consideration. I cannot allow anything of this kind to happen."

Cardinal Egan said the meeting had helped improve communication between the American church and the Vatican on the scandal.

"What I think has been most important here is that the Holy See, the pope and his top officials have had a chance to explain to us their reaction to all of this in great detail, and we've had a chance to explain our understanding to them," the cardinal said.

The interview was the first time that he responded to questions since reports in March that he had allowed priests accused of sexually abusing minors to continue working while he was bishop of Bridgeport, Conn.

Cardinal Egan declined to discuss crucial issues that have been the object of talks among the prelates, whether homosexuality has a role in the abuse of minors and whether or under what conditions accused priests can return to ministries.

"I would also say that The New York Times and everybody else has got to be very careful about statements, about reports and so forth," he said.

What prompted his concern, he added, was a picture of him in *La Stampa* of Turin. Under it was a quotation attributed to him saying homosexuals should not be admitted to seminaries because they risked becoming pedophiles.

"Never has anyone asked me anything about seminaries, about the words they use as gay and so forth," the cardinal said. The comment actually was a reference to words attributed to the rector of St. Patrick's Cathedral, Msgr. Eugene V. Clark, in a homily on Sunday, Cardinal Egan said.

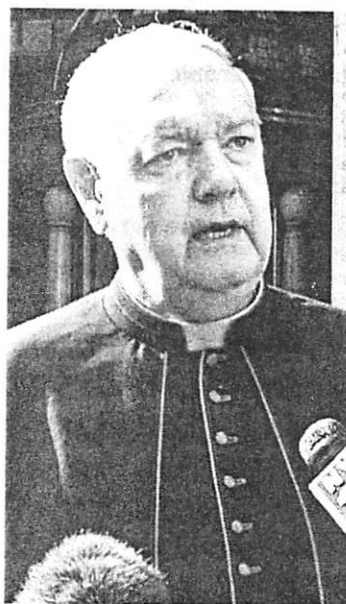
When asked about homosexuals in the priesthood, Cardinal Egan responded:

"I would just say this. The most important thing is to clean up the truth. And the truth is I have never said anything."

When could an accused priest return to ministry, Cardinal Egan was asked earlier in the day. The issue was a major one, but he could not immediately answer the question. "In due course, I will," he said.

In an interview with television reporters in the morning, he had said bishops could take different approaches, investigating before making a decision or sending away a priest immediately for psychological evaluation.

In an interview in late afternoon with another television reporter, Cardinal Egan was also asked about criticism that he had shown more concern for the church than for vic-



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Cardinal Edward Egan being interviewed as he left his hotel.

tims of sex abuse by priests. The cardinal called the criticism nonsense. He said he had nothing more to add to a letter to parishioners in the archdiocese on Sunday in which he said he was deeply sorry "if in hindsight we also discover that mistakes may have been made" over the prompt removal of priests and over helping victims.

"I have said what I thought I needed to say to the people, and I hope it worked," he said. "And that's the end."

Most of the other cardinals are staying in relatively spartan rooms at the North American College or the Santa Marta, a hotel-like residence in the Vatican. But Cardinal Egan is staying where he often does when visiting Rome, the five-star Crowne Plaza Rome-Minerva hotel near the Pantheon. As if to head off any suggestion that he was sojourning in excessive luxury, the cardinal mentioned that the hotel's chairman was a friend of 40 years and let him stay there.