

Nation

Local cardinals back national policy on abusive priests

McCarrick, Keeler look forward to Vatican meetings on sex scandals



D.C. Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, who leaves Sunday for the Vatican, met reporters at the Archdiocesan Pastoral Center in Hyattsville yesterday.

By Julia Duin
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Two local cardinals, who are among the 13 prelates summoned to Rome for an emergency meeting on the sex-abuse crisis involving U.S. Catholic clergy, said yesterday they support a binding national policy to better deal with errant priests.

Although some individual dioceses have sexual-abuse policies in place, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), which consists of the leaders of America's 62 million Catholics, has no national policy.

As a result, bishops' treatment of priests who preyed sexually on children and teen-age boys has ranged from a no-tolerance stance to simply moving the cleric to a different parish.

Furthermore, all priests who are removed from the priesthood must undergo a lengthy laicization process that must involve Rome. Any changes in that policy suggested during next week's Rome meetings would be acted on during the semiannual USCCB summit in June.

Cardinals Theodore McCarrick

of Washington and William Keeler of Baltimore told reporters they were looking forward to the meeting, which will also involve Boston's Cardinal Bernard Law. Many Catholics have demanded the Boston cardinal's resignation after he acknowledged not removing one priest accused of molesting dozens of people.

Cardinal McCarrick brushed aside speculations about Cardinal Law, saying, "I don't see his eminence resigning." But he did add that the scandals have made priests fearful of any contact with children.

"These terrible problems have affected only less than 2 percent of our priests," he said of the Catholic Church's 48,000 clergy.

"But it has become so blown up — that's as it probably could be — because of that, the priests are concerned about this," he added. "We have to put it into context. Even one little child being hurt by this way — it is too much. It drives you crazy that this can happen."

"But let us remember we are talking about less than 2 percent of our priests. And that so many of our great Catholic priests are great heroes and great balanced, holy

and wonderful men — men striving to serve the people with all they can."

He also defended priestly celibacy, saying, "That's why we've had so many good priests."

Cardinal Keeler said the Rome meeting will be a "positive step forward" in dealing with "a very vexing challenge for Catholics in the United States."

The Rome meetings are slated for April 23-24. Church officials have been vague as to whether the pope himself would attend the meetings, as he is in poor health. The talks will be led by three key non-American church leaders: Cardinals Dario Castrillon Hoyos, Joseph Ratzinger and Giovanni Battista Re. The three men, respectively, head the Vatican departments, called congregations, that are responsible for the clergy, doctrine and bishops.

Cardinal Keeler, who will send tape-recorded messages to the 162 parishes in his archdiocese to be played this Sunday, returns April 25. A spokesman said the news media are already lining up for interviews.

"People are already asking for



Cardinal William Keeler

his arrival times and he hasn't even booked his ticket yet," communications assistant Matt Lane said.

● This article is based in part on wire service reports.