

A church in crisis

Opinion

The Toledo Blade

March 3, 2005

<http://toledoblade.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20050303/OPINION02/503030396>

THIS is a tough time to be a Catholic in Toledo. Sexual abuse by priests has rocked the church to its foundation, nationally and locally. Another priest is charged with murdering a nun in a bizarre ritualistic crime 25 years ago at a local hospital. Dwindling enrollment and membership has forced the bishop to close several schools and churches.

So it would seem foolish to aggravate the substantial public relations damage that has already been done to the Catholic Diocese of Toledo by engaging in conduct that suggests the church has been less than forthcoming in the police investigation of the slaying in 1980 of Sister Margaret Ann Pahl, or in the broader inquiry into criminal activity in the diocese.

But Toledo police believe they have been stymied in their attempts to examine all records pertaining to Father Gerald Robinson, who is accused of the murder.

Authorities believe that information and files have been withheld perhaps out of a sense of obligation to Canon 489 of the Catholic Church, which requires that a secret archive be maintained for the storage of records related to allegations of crimes committed by clerics.

Compounding the issue is the sworn statement by a Toledo detective in unsealed court documents that Father Robinson failed one of two lie detector tests - the second was deemed inconclusive - in 1980. The test result showed that "deception" was indicated and that Father Robinson was involved in the nun's murder, Toledo police say.

Fr. Michael Billian, episcopal vicar and the diocese's top administrator, says that no such secret files exist, though that would place the diocese in direct conflict with Canon 489. Father Billian insists that secrecy doesn't square with the diocese's "new policy of transparency."

But if that is so, the church's definition of transparency doesn't agree with law enforcement's, or ours. Indeed, suspicions were fueled when the diocese, during the execution of a search warrant by investigators, failed to mention the existence of a Father Robinson file but produced it after the arrival of legal counsel Thomas Pletz.

If other damaging records exist, we are concerned that the failure of the church to provide them and the failure of authorities to seize them only further undermines the church. The natural suspicion is that the passage of time leads to the disappearance of records.

It is lamentable that Toledo Police detectives felt they had to take the extraordinary step of seeking two search warrants, two days apart, to get information bearing on the Robinson case. Certainly it can be fairly inferred that their earlier requests for all relevant materials had not been met.

And it is regrettable as well that the detectives, upon discovery of a file related to sex abuse cases, did not immediately seek a third warrant which would have permitted them to seize it.

At a time when the church's image is badly shaken, the diocese should not make a bad situation worse. It can only help itself if it produces and releases any and all materials related to the commission of possible crimes. If, as it claims, it has already done so, why did the police feel the need for a search warrant?

The Catholic Diocese of Toledo is already in crisis mode. Reluctance to sincerely embrace its own declared policy of "transparency" only speeds its departure from the traditional values of the Church.