

Catholic bishops to discuss clergy sex abuse, Catholic lawmakers in closed session

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In a private retreat this week, U.S. Roman Catholic bishops will discuss some internal church rifts that have become uncomfortably public over the clergy sex abuse crisis and, separately, Holy Communion and politics.

Bishops disagree on whether Catholic lawmakers at odds with church teaching should receive the sacrament. They've sparked a national debate on the issue as a Catholic who supports abortion rights John Kerry is poised to become the Democratic nominee for president.

The bishops also will decide whether to override the objections of some U.S. church leaders and authorize a second round of audits of American dioceses _ reviews that are aimed at determining whether the dioceses are doing enough to combat the molestation scandal.

Bishops hope to emerge from the weeklong meeting, which starts Monday in Englewood, Colo., with a more unified message on both fronts, church observers say.

"When everybody looks at the Catholic Church, they equate it with the hierarchy, and they think the hierarchy speaks with one voice or one mind," said David Gibson, a former Vatican newsman and author of "The Coming Catholic Church." "What these various controversies has shown is the reality that they're not united, that they have enormous differences of opinion within their own ranks."

Each bishop decides policy on interacting with politicians for his own diocese, and even officials in the Vatican have noted the American discord.

Archbishop Raymond Burke of St. Louis has said he would not give the sacrament to Kerry. Other bishops have said Kerry should not attempt to take Communion, but would not be denied if he did. Bishop Michael Sheridan of Colorado Springs, Colo., even those who vote for Catholic politicians who support policy contrary to church teaching should refrain from taking Communion.

Yet several prelates have said Communion should not be used as a sanction.

A task force, led by Washington Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, is looking into the situation and will give an interim report at this week's meeting, but may not release its final guidelines for church leaders until after the November election.

Meanwhile, more divisions have come to light over the abuse audits, which were part of the bishops' toughened policy on sex abuse approved two years ago.

Bishops in Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, and elsewhere sent confidential letters to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops asking for the diocesan reviews to be delayed.

When their objections were made public last month, victim advocates and leaders of the National Review Board, the lay watchdog panel the bishops created, accused church leaders of abandoning a central reform.

An agreement on future audits and on authorizing a psychological and sexual study of the Catholic priesthood was reached following the uproar, but details won't be released until bishops give their final OK this week.

Resentment toward the board lingers, despite the accord.

Bishop Donald Pelotte of Gallup, N.M., said the Denver meeting would likely lead to a "reformulation" of the panel.

Illinois Justice Anne Burke, who leads the board, said none of the bishops have spoken with her about changes beyond appointing replacements for her and three other members of the 12-person group who are leaving.

"In a way, the recent controversies and tensions were predictable," said Russell Shaw, a Catholic writer and former spokesman for the U.S. bishops. "The Review Board represents the introduction into the polity and governance of the Catholic Church a principle we're really not familiar with: institutional accountability."

The Rev. Thomas Reese, editor of the Jesuit magazine *America*, said he was saddened by the public fight, because it had obscured much of the progress bishops have made since the abuse crisis began in early 2002.

In February, the bishops released extensive reports on the scope of the scandal since 1950 and its origins, and conducted a first round of diocesan audits, which found widespread compliance with the abuse prevention plan.

"Nobody likes to be audited, but when you're all done and everything's fine, it helps people have confidence in what you're doing," Reese said. "They got so much good press out of the first audit, bring it on again. That ought to be their response."

This week's meeting is a special spiritual assembly that bishops hold every five years behind closed doors, with some time set aside for business. Even though there are no public sessions, protests are planned by groups representing abuse victims, lay reformers, anti-abortion activists who want bishops to take a harder line against pro-abortion rights politicians and advocates for optional celibacy for clergy.

Some groups have criticized the bishops for not opening at least part of the business sessions.

"I would be willing to grant them talking up to a certain point in executive session. Maybe they need the privacy, but all of it? No," Shaw said. "The matters are just too important and too public to be handled in that manner."