

U.S. Catholic Bishops Approve New Series of Audits on Abuse

By LAURIE GOODSTEIN
June 16, 2004
New York Times
Denver

In continuing fallout from the clergy sexual abuse scandal, the nation's Roman Catholic bishops voted overwhelmingly yesterday at a closed meeting in Colorado to approve a second round of audits to assess whether each diocese has carried out policies to prevent abuse.

The audits became an issue after some bishops in Nebraska, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and New York, including Cardinal Edward M. Egan, sent confidential letters to their colleagues arguing for a delay. When the letters became public, Catholic lay leaders and victims' advocates accused the bishops of backtracking from the commitments they made two years ago, at the height of the scandal.

The bishops also spent the afternoon discussing whether Catholic lawmakers who defy church teaching on abortion should be denied Communion, several church officials who spoke on condition of anonymity said. In a sign of how delicate the issue is for the church, the Vatican office responsible for doctrinal issues sent the bishops' meeting a letter of guidance on how to approach the Communion controversy, the church officials said.

The bishops are meeting this week for what they call a special assembly at the Inverness Hotel and Conference Center, a luxury resort in Englewood, Colo. The assembly is closed to the public and the press, and the bishops were asked in advance not to respond to requests for interviews.

Some bishops have been accused of trying to influence the presidential race after they said they would deny Communion to Senator John Kerry, a Catholic and Democratic presidential candidate who favors abortion rights.

Church officials at the meeting declined to say what guidance was in the letter, which was sent from the Vatican by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who heads the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. But they suggested that it reiterated church teaching, which holds that Catholics who are aware they are living in serious sin or who reject church doctrine should refrain from receiving Communion.

Since the controversy over the Eucharist erupted, some bishops have pushed for the meeting to issue a clear statement on the church's position now. A task force studying the church's relationship to Catholic lawmakers was not scheduled to issue its recommendations until after the presidential election.

On the abuse issue, the bishops voted, 207 to 14, to approve the audit, with one abstention. The first such audit was conducted last year by outside investigators, many of them former F.B.I. agents. It found that 90 percent of the dioceses were in compliance with the bishops' sexual abuse prevention program, which includes steps like background checks for those who work with children.

The bishops also agreed to hire outside researchers to conduct an in-depth study of abusive priests and their victims. The study is expected to cost the church about \$4 million or \$5 million, said Justice Anne M. Burke, interim chairwoman of the National Review Board, a watchdog group of laypeople appointed by the bishops. The bishops agreed to such a study two years ago, but some had recently questioned the need for it.

Ms. Burke, who is a justice on the Illinois Appellate Court, said that behind the bishops' discomfort with the audits and the study is that they are both overseen by the review board, whose members asserted their independence soon after being appointed by the bishops two years ago.