

Catholics urged to stay vigilant in battle against child sex abuse

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People in the pews were kept in the dark for half a century.

Now it is up to average Catholics to hold their church accountable to protect children from sexual abuse, the former head of the national lay review board monitoring the church's response to the scandal said Wednesday.

"Raise some hell. . . . Be vigilant. Be outspoken. And demand transparency," Illinois Appellate Justice Anne Burke said in an impassioned speech at the St. Joseph Center in Cleveland. "No more passive Catholics. That is my mantra now."

Burke served on the lay review board appointed by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops from June 2002 until her term ended last November. She was interim chairwoman from July 2003 until she left the board. Her talk Wednesday was sponsored by FutureChurch, a national independent lay Catholic group based in Cleveland.

Burke said if she were to write a book about her experiences, it would be titled "Asleep at the Switch," or "Who's Running this Joint?"

Yet even after what she called the "cataclysmic failure" of bishops to protect children or care for abuse victims, there still are many church leaders who want to return to the way things were, she said.

In an earlier interview and in her speech, Burke said some bishops want to see the church's charter for protecting young people "die a quick death," and there already have been efforts to stop the annual national audits of each diocese's compliance with the document.

Some bishops still give more support to offending priests than victims, she said, posing a serious danger to the "zero tolerance" policy prohibiting abusive priests from returning to ministry. Burke said some bishops even proposed replacing the word "victim" with the word "accuser" in the charter.

She appealed to lay Catholics to demand safe environments free of known abusers.

"The church needs to be reborn, and it needs the heroic service of the laity in our nation to do it," Burke said.

In the Diocese of Cleveland, 117 priests had been accused of sexually abusing children since 1950. A recent audit found the diocese was in compliance with the national charter.