

1-25-08 - Dialogues aim to foster healing within church

By EILEEN MARKEY, National Catholic Reporter

Boston - It worked in post-apartheid South Africa. It works for thousands of couples in bitter divorces. Can structured mediation and conflict resolution work to reconcile disaffected Catholics with the Catholic church? A group is trying it in Boston.

Last year, in Boston -- the city that was at the epicenter of the clergy sexual abuse scandal and its cover-up by the Catholic hierarchy -- the Paulist Center began a campaign to foster reconciliation between aggrieved Catholics and the Boston archdiocese. Last fall, Catholics and former Catholics sat down with Richard Erikson, the archdiocese's vicar general. They told their stories and attempted to arrive at understanding, not as enemies, but as fellow Christians. On Jan. 25, at their national conference, the Paulist Fathers -- an order of Catholic priests founded in 1858 as missionaries to North America -- will decide whether to expand the ministry to their 14 Paulist centers around the country.

The point isn't necessarily to get the disaffected believers back in the pews, but to foster dialogue -- and, organizers hope, healing -- for people deeply hurt by their church's behavior.

"The church has to respond to people who are alienated. The goal is to help people to heal, to listen, to hear, to engage," said Fr. Bob Bowers, who was hired by the Paulist Center of Boston to facilitate its reconciliation program.

Bowers, a diocesan priest who was as disillusioned and angry as any of the parishioners of his now-closed parish, requested time off from the diocese in February 2006 to "figure out if I still wanted to be part of this." He went to work with the Paulist Fathers, an order that took up reconciliation within and outside the church as its major mission in 2002.

At the Paulist Center, Bowers was tasked with putting that into action by fostering reconciliation between the institutional church and the thousands of Massachusetts Catholics disgusted by the church's high-handedness and obfuscation during the sex abuse crisis.

But it wasn't simply that scandal that has driven people out of their church, Bowers said. "The culture has changed. Critical thinking became what people were taught in school. There was a chipping away at authority and of people being able to just accept what people in charge said at face value," he posited, saying that church hierarchy too often speak from on high, instead of engaging laity as adults. "You've got these big issues of how the laity relates to the hierarchy lurking, and then the scandal just topped it all off."

Many Catholics have left to find a spiritual home in other churches, he said, but the wound remains.

"People are saying 'I'm sick of going home from Mass angry,' or, 'I'm hurt that I left and no one seemed to care,'" Bowers said. "The goal of this reconciliation program as I see it is serenity, less angst, the ability for people to be able to walk into a Catholic church without that feeling in the pit of their stomachs."

Bowers looked to secular models of mediation and conflict resolution. "There is this stupid idea that the church can solve its own problems. ... There are professionals that can help us, that are willing to help us."

Robert Bordone is one of them. A member of the Paulist Center's pastoral council, he teaches at Harvard Law School and directs a mediation clinic there where students hone conflict resolution skills. He suggested that maybe the law students could use their techniques to help defuse the bitterness created by the sex abuse scandal and parish closings.

To that end, two of his students, David Baron and Becky Jaffe, used tested methods of structured conversation to design what they called a "safe space" for discussion. The team facilitated a series of meetings at the Paulist Center, first between Catholics who labeled themselves satisfied with the church and those dissatisfied or

alienated; then between various lay Catholics and priests and pastors; and finally between the vicar general and his staff and disaffected Catholics or former Catholics.

To be part of the session, participants agreed to listen to each other, to use civil language and tone, and to maintain respectful body language. That wasn't always possible, Bordone said. The sessions "did not all go brilliantly," he said. "Some people had so much anger, they just really needed to vent, to tell their stories. They weren't ready to hear the other." Others left with some kernel of peace, some window of greater understanding. None of the participants were available for comment because they were assured anonymity when they agreed to participate.

Erikson issued a written statement on the program, calling it consistent with his work to promote healing in the archdiocese: "These conversations are in service to the church and, quite frankly, important for me to be an effective and informed leader. I must listen compassionately to the experiences, hurts and dreams of those involved in these conversations."

The dialogue sessions will continue during the spring semester with a fresh crop of student interns.

Bowers is lobbying the Paulists' Office of Reconciliation to fund the program so it can be replicated in dioceses across the country. He said the model could be useful in negotiating disputes within parishes and in bridging gaps between traditionalist and modern Catholics in addition to offering an olive branch between hierarchy and laity. "As a church that professes love and reconciliation and forgiveness, we have to do this," Bowers said. "We have a duty."

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