

Egan, on the carpet

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An anonymous letter calling on priests to hold a series of no-confidence votes in New York Cardinal Edward Egan is being taken seriously enough by the leader of the New York Catholic archdiocese that he has called a meeting of his priests council for early next week. Presumably he will seek advice on how to answer charges in a letter, circulated among priests and then via a blog, that Egan's relations with his priests "have been defined by dishonesty, deception, disinterest and disregard."

The matter naturally is of interest to Catholics and other church observers. It rises to much wider public and community interest because of the sex-abuse scandal that so rocked the Catholic Church, and the subsequent and summary removal by Egan of more than a dozen priests from local parishes without clarification or explanation. In other words, the ousted clerics were dispatched in a manner that painted them all guilty.

While the Catholic Church has its internal procedures for reviewing allegations, when they rise to criminal ones, or present as possible civil court matters, the individuals being accused, including priests, still retain their civil rights and a presumption of innocence. The public retains an interest in the process, and outcomes. Egan himself was criticized throughout the very public ordeal for turning a blind eye toward abuse. The summary dismissals only fueled speculation, about the priests' roles and possible scapegoating.

Four years ago, the nation's Roman Catholic bishops presented to the public a "zero tolerance" or "one-strike-you're-out" protocol for priests accused of sexual abuse. In 2002, at least 14 New York priests were removed from posts after accusations against them were lodged. Among them was Monsignor Charles Kavanagh, a major fund-raiser for the Archdiocese of New York, who has vociferously denied any wrongdoing.

Journal News religion writer Gary Stern reported Friday that a letter harshly critical of Egan cites the "cruel and ruthless" way in which Egan dismissed priests from the faculty of St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers early in his six-year tenure as archbishop, and states that the archbishop is more concerned with financial matters than his priests. An earlier, 2004 letter about Egan, signed by about 75 priests, complained that priests accused of sexual abuse in the archdiocese were not afforded due process.

The latest letter suggests that a series of no-confidence votes in Egan could influence the papal nuncio to accept the archbishop's resignation when he turns 75 in April. Because of the gravity of the abuse allegations, the payment of hundred of millions of dollars in largely secret settlements to victims and their families, and the legal limbo in which many clergy find themselves, any new openness from the church, Egan and his priests would be welcome.