

5-15-08 - Excommunication: Why has the St. Louis archbishop not acted against pedophile priests?

By David Clohessy, Special to the St. Louis (MO) Beacon

Last month, Pope Benedict XVI visited the United States and promised to do everything he could to rid the priesthood of predators. Before even touching down on U.S. soil, he said, "We will absolutely exclude pedophiles from the sacred ministry."

This is a good time to assess how his local representative is doing on that front.

There are two ways St. Louis Archbishop Raymond Burke could oust pedophile priests. He could defrock them (kicking them out of the priesthood) or excommunicate them (kicking them out of the church). Dozens of Burke's brother bishops have defrocked child-molesting clergy. None, however, has taken the more severe step of excommunication, which is the most severe penalty the Catholic hierarchy can impose on anyone.

Because of a continuing dispute over parish governance, Burke has excommunicated several lay people on the board of St. Stanislaus parish and the church's pastor.

He has also excommunicated two local women who declared themselves to be ordained Catholic priests.

None of these individuals was deemed guilty of any crime. None was criminally charged or civilly sued for crimes. None admitted to or was even accused of any crimes. But they were basically ousted from the Catholic Church.

In contrast, over the past 20 years, we can't recall a single other priest, nun, seminarian, lay employee or church volunteer in St. Louis (current or former) whom Burke or his predecessors ever excommunicated, even those who have been clearly and repeatedly charged with, sued for, accused of or deemed guilty of heinous child sex crimes.

They haven't excommunicated James Beine, Felix Bland or James Funke, who pled guilty to child sex crimes. They haven't excommunicated Bryan Kuchar, Thomas Graham or Gary Wolken, who were convicted here of child sex crimes.

They haven't excommunicated Fred Lenczycki, Gregory Sutton or Romano Ferraro, who worked here but were convicted elsewhere of child sex crimes.

They haven't excommunicated James Gummersbach, who was found guilty in a civil child molestation trial or Robert F. Johnston and Joseph Lessard, who admitted child sexual abuse to church authorities.

They haven't excommunicated Gerhardt B. Lehmkuhl or John P. Hess, who pled guilty to child porn charges.

They haven't excommunicated Robert Yim, Donald J. "Duck" Straub or Leroy Valentine, who have been formally defrocked because of multiple, credible child sex abuse allegations.

They haven't excommunicated Norman Christian or Michael S. McGrath, against whom several civil child sex abuse lawsuits have been settled.

All of these men are still officially welcome in the Catholic Church. Though suspended from active ministry, most of them are still on the payroll, often being unwittingly or unwillingly supported by the generosity of devout St. Louis Catholics.

But three women, who were recently "ordained" and now call themselves priests, were swiftly excommunicated. In Burke's eyes, apparently, women acting like priests is a greater crime than priests acting like criminals.

Several men and women, who's goal has been to preserve St. Stan's parish, were swiftly excommunicated. In Burke's eyes, apparently, Catholics acting like concerned parishioners is a greater crime than priests acting like criminals.

And St. Stan's pastor, Fr. Marek Bozek, was swiftly excommunicated. In Burke's eyes, apparently, a priest acting like a pastor is a greater crime than priests acting like criminals.

Burke is far more aggressive in excommunicating Catholics than virtually all of his colleagues.

If he excommunicates people for non-criminal behavior, he should also excommunicate them for criminal behavior. If he excommunicates people for violating his edicts, he should also excommunicate them for violating children.

Pope John Paul II once said, "There is no place in the priesthood for those who would harm the young." More recently, Pope Benedict said, "Whoever is really guilty of being a pedophile cannot be a priest."

Burke speaks often about the importance of obeying church rules and authorities. We look forward to him obeying the pope's authority regarding predator priests.