

11-11-07 - Is the Church really this blind?

Chicago's archbishop is an example of a church hierarchy that still hasn't learned the lessons of the abuse scandal.

By Jason Berry, Los Angeles Times

In 2004, Bishop Wilton Gregory, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, proclaimed that after two years of relentless investigations into priests who sexually abused children and the bishops who protected them, "the scandal is history."

For reporters weary of the scandal's emotionally draining subject matter, Gregory's sound bite invited a retreat. The bishops pointed to the "youth protection charter" they had developed, laying out guidelines for removing predator priests and for treating victims responsibly. They released data showing that they had identified about 4,400 abusive U.S. priests. They had a reform agenda, it seemed, and promised new vigilance in protecting children rather than clerics. In the months that followed, the sexual abuse crisis receded as national news, though civil litigation and criminal prosecutions continued to make occasional headlines.

But did the church really learn its lesson? Cardinal Francis George, the archbishop of Chicago, is currently preparing to assume the presidency of the Conference of Catholic Bishops, whose annual meeting begins Monday in Baltimore. His new position would make George highly visible when Pope Benedict XVI arrives on his first trip to the U.S. next spring, which is fitting because George was a valuable ally of then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger when the cardinals' conclave chose him to be pope in 2005.

The problem is that George shows little indication of having internalized the lessons of the scandal. He displays a stunning insensitivity to the church's failures. And twice since the 2002 conference in Dallas that adopted the youth protection charter, George has flouted the church's supposed zero-tolerance attitude in his handling of abusive priests.

In February 2003, for instance, the Chicago Sun-Times reported that Father Kenneth Martin of Wilmington, Del., a consultant to the archdiocese on liturgical texts, had been staying at the cardinal's mansion during his monthly visits to Chicago. He had been staying there despite the fact that he had pleaded guilty in 2001 in Maryland to sexually abusing a teenage boy over three years in the 1970s when he was a lay teacher. Martin received a suspended sentence and was declared by the diocese to be a "priest in good standing" in Wilmington, provided he not do public ministry.

Needless to say, this was shocking news. The members of the 12-person National Review Board, which had been appointed by the Conference of Catholic Bishops to conduct research on the causes and context of the scandal and report back with recommendations on how to avoid future scandals, had met with George just the day before the story broke in the Sun-Times -- yet he had told them nothing about the priest's visits. What could be more telling about George's attitude than his willingness to welcome an admitted pedophile as a houseguest?

When Sun-Times reporter Cathleen Falsani asked George why he had allowed Martin to stay in his official residence after his misdeeds had become known, and why the priest was still working for the archdiocese as a consultant, George did not apologize but defended his colleague. "Are we saying that people with any kind of question in their past are not employable?" he responded. "Unless we want to say these people are simply permanent pariahs, is it appropriate to put his [Martin's] life under scrutiny that way?"

"When I read the Sun-Times," said former Rep. Leon Panetta, a California Democrat who served on the National Review Board and was one of those who had met with George that week, "it confirmed for me what is at the heart of this [pedophile priest] problem -- the [Catholic] hierarchy's failure to understand the seriousness of the crisis."

Members of the National Review Board made a second trip to Chicago nearly a year later to consult with the cardinal. George celebrated Mass for them, but then, according to three sources present at the meeting, he issued a warning over coffee and doughnuts: "You will be the downfall of the church!"

The group was dumbstruck. "The bishops and priests have failed to deal with this [scandal]," Panetta said he told George. The healing process could not begin, Panetta said, unless the church acknowledged the problem.

Several people present at the meeting subsequently confirmed George's remarks before I called the cardinal for comment for an article for the National Catholic Reporter. George's spokesman called me back to say: "The cardinal categorically denies making the statement attributed to him, and anyone who said that he said that either heard him wrong or misunderstood him."

But matters got worse. In August 2005, police questioned Father Daniel McCormack of Chicago after a mother charged that he had molested her 8-year-old son at Our Lady of the Westside School, where he taught. In October, George ignored his own archdiocesan review board's recommendation to remove McCormack, instead allowing him to continue teaching and coaching. In January 2006, McCormack was arrested on charges of sexually abusing another boy at the school. When asked about it, the cardinal, incredulously, said he had taken no action because he had had no information from law enforcement. McCormack has since pleaded guilty and gone to jail.

The archdiocese did take action against Barbara Westrick, the school's principal, who had called the police after she learned of the complaint against the priest. She was fired in June. Although the archdiocese denies it, it seems likely that her criticisms of the church's response cost her her job.

A reform group, Voice of the Faithful, has called on George not to assume the presidency of the Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Despite all the supposed reforms, and despite the new guidelines and rules that were supposed to have taken care of the problems several years ago, the reality is that many members of the church hierarchy have been slow to change their attitude.

Listen to the words of Thomas J. Paprocki, one of George's auxiliary bishops in Chicago. Paprocki, who has a law degree and church license in canon law, gave a sermon Oct. 15 for the Red Mass, a gathering of lawyers and jurists, in Grand Rapids, Mich. The bishop scorned the church's escalating financial losses to victims of predatory priests. "The church is under attack," Paprocki declared, comparing the civil litigation to Henry VIII's seizure of "church property and kill[ing] those who did not accept his notion of the supremacy of the crown."

Displaying the callousness that has cursed so many Catholic bishops for so long, Paprocki insulted the victims of the scandals, as well as the attorneys and judges in their cases, with these words: "We must use our religious discernment to recognize that the principal force behind these attacks is none other than the devil."

The youth protection charter says that a priest accused of child abuse must be removed until his case is resolved. For bishops who conceal or move or condone such priests, there is no penalty. They serve at the pleasure of the pope. That double standard -- which strikes a lot of us Catholics as devilish -- is personified in Cardinal Francis George, who is unfit to be president of the Catholic bishops.

Jason Berry is the author of "Lead Us Not Into Temptation" and, with Gerald Renner, "Vows of Silence," among other books. He is directing a documentary, based on the latter book, to be released next year.