

6-7-08 - Leading California Catholics urge Australian bishop to cancel tour promoting book on clergy sexual abuse

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By Duke Helfand, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

Four of California's leading Roman Catholic bishops, including Los Angeles Cardinal Roger Mahony, have taken the extraordinary step of urging an Australian bishop to cancel a monthlong tour of the United States to promote his controversial new book about clergy sexual abuse.

Following direction from the Vatican, the California religious leaders and eight other prominent bishops around the country have asked former auxiliary Bishop Geoffrey Robinson of Sydney to steer clear of their dioceses because of his "problematic positions" on priestly celibacy and other issues.

In his book, "Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus," Robinson argues that the church's celibacy requirement has contributed to the sex abuse crisis. He openly criticizes the papacy for failing to provide leadership. And he wonders whether the Catholic Church has been more concerned with managing the scandal than confronting it.

Those positions have put Robinson squarely at odds with church leaders on three continents.

In a joint letter last month, Mahony and nine other American bishops warned Robinson that his visit could be "a source of disunity and cause of confusion among the faithful of the particular churches we serve."

They cited an investigation of his book by Australian bishops, who found "doctrinal difficulties" and pointed out that the head of the Vatican office in charge of all bishops had asked Robinson to cancel his trip.

"I hereby deny you permission to speak in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles," Mahony wrote to Robinson last month, citing a bishop's authority under canon law that was repeated in separate letters from Bishop Tod Brown in Orange County and Archbishop George H. Niederauer in San Francisco.

But Robinson, 70, said he has no intention of canceling any part of a trip that began May 16 in Philadelphia and brings him to California on Tuesday for appearances in La Jolla, Costa Mesa, Culver City and San Francisco.

"I'm not looking for any confrontation," Robinson said in a telephone interview. "I'm saying, 'Let's start from abuse and follow that where it leads. If we find that obligatory celibacy has contributed to abuse, we must put that on the table.' "

Robinson's California swing comes eight weeks after Pope Benedict XVI met privately with sexual-abuse victims during a U.S. visit and expressed "deep shame" over the scandal, which has cost the American Catholic Church more than \$2 billion in legal settlements.

He also told the nation's Catholic bishops that they have a "God-given responsibility as pastors to . . . foster healing, to promote reconciliation and to reach out with loving concern to those so seriously wronged."

Robinson's sponsors -- led by the Catholic reform group Voice of the Faithful -- say his tour is meant to further that mission, and they plan to press ahead despite what they believe is a campaign to silence him.

"Is this the way American bishops respond to Pope Benedict's call to do everything possible to heal the church?" asked Dan Bartley, president of Voice of the Faithful, which pushes for doctrinal change in the church.

"In light of the pope's comments, we believe that blocking an open and honest discussion about what caused the crisis is appalling."

Robinson served as auxiliary bishop in the Archdiocese of Sydney from 1984 to 2004. Midway through his tenure, he was elected by fellow bishops to a national committee coordinating the church's response to clergy sex abuse in that country. He served as the committee's co-chairman for six years.

"I felt sick to the stomach at the stories that victims told me," he writes in the introduction to his book.

"Those years left an indelible mark on me, for they led me to a sense of profound disillusionment with many things within my church, typified by the manner in which, I was convinced, a number of people, at every level, were seeking to 'manage' the problem and make it 'go away,' rather than truly confront and eradicate it."

The victims' stories also stirred Robinson's memories of being sexually abused in his youth by a stranger unaffiliated with the church.

Robinson said he came to the "unshakable conviction" that the church needed to undergo "profound and enduring change," particularly as it related to issues of power and sex.

He openly questioned its monopoly on definitive truth. And he criticized Benedict and his predecessor, Pope John Paul II, saying their unwillingness to reexamine obligatory celibacy for priests has undercut the church's credibility.

Robinson said he ultimately concluded that he could not continue to serve as a bishop of a church that left him with such "profound reservations." He resigned and began to write his book, which was published last year.

Australian bishops soon took notice. In an unsigned statement issued last month, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference praised Robinson's efforts to help abuse victims but said his work had "doctrinal difficulties," citing his "questioning of the authority of the Catholic Church to teach truth definitively."

The Vatican also got involved. Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, head of the office that oversees all bishops, wrote to Robinson asking him to cancel his book tour, according to correspondence between the American bishops and Robinson that was released by Mahony's spokesman.

Re communicated his wishes to the Vatican's ambassador to the United States. Several U.S. bishops were "invited" to write to Robinson, denying him permission to speak in their dioceses, according to Mahony's spokesman.

Ten religious leaders whose dioceses Robinson was scheduled to visit -- including Mahony, Bishop Robert Brom of San Diego, and the archbishops of Seattle, Philadelphia, Boston and Washington -- signed a May 9 letter asking him to cancel his trip.

Meanwhile, Mahony, Brown and Niederauer sent letters of their own repeating the request. They cited the same canon law requiring bishops to safeguard church teachings in their dioceses.

Brown wrote: "I want you to know that you do not have my permission to speak in the Diocese of Orange and I ask you to cancel your speaking engagement here."

Spokesmen for the dioceses said the church cannot stop Robinson from speaking, particularly at secular sites. In California, he will give talks at two universities, a hotel and a community center.

The dioceses said they are not trying to silence Robinson, who notified each of his plans, but to guard against what they believe is his misinformation.

"It's not circle the wagons," said Tod M. Tamberg, a spokesman for Mahony. "If Bishop Robinson knew what we were doing to protect kids in this archdiocese, he would probably say that's great. The controversy over his theological positions should not be allowed to obscure the lay oversight and openness that are cornerstones of our child-protection efforts."

But Robinson remains undaunted.

"I was invited to speak. I said I would," he replied. "I intend to keep to that. There are questions on people's minds that will not simply go away."