

April 16, 2007 - Reformists: Diocese plan isn't enough

By Bill Bishop, The Register-Guard, Portland (OR)

With the approval of a bankruptcy reorganization for the Archdiocese of Portland expected as early as today, church reformers fear that the archdiocese has succeeded in avoiding public accountability for decades of child sexual abuse by priests.

The archdiocese will emerge virtually unscathed, at least financially. Payments to 175 claimants will be covered by \$52 million from church insurers and a \$40 million loan. No parish properties will be sold. No church leaders will be forced to testify publicly about their behind-the-scenes response to specific cases of child abuse by clergy.

Court records show that once the reorganization is in place, the archdiocese will have paid more than \$104 million to settle sexual abuse claims since 1984.

If bankruptcy enables church leaders to remain silent about their role, it will be a new means to an old end, said John Moynihan, spokesman for the lay Catholic reformist group Voice of The Faithful, which formed in Boston after the clergy abuse scandal emerged there and has been watching the Portland case - the first bankruptcy filed by a diocese in response to sexual abuse lawsuits.

"That's the game they've played for years," he said.

In Massachusetts, where civil law caps damage awards from nonprofit organizations at \$20,000, the church has nevertheless paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to individuals to avoid going to court, he said. The practice is the most obvious example of how church leaders will pay dearly to avoid the spotlight of a trial, he said.

"It's their prime motivation," Moynihan said.

Catholic church leaders said bankruptcy is "a last resort." And they contend that their 2005 Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People takes "extraordinary steps" to address the child abuse that has stalked the church since the 1960s.

The issue erupted into an enduring nationwide scandal in 2002, after news accounts in Boston exposed the extent to which Cardinal Bernard Law covered up for abusive priests, enabling them to continue abusing children.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops describes the problem as "a crisis without precedent in our times." They repeatedly have publicly apologized "for too often failing victims and the Catholic people in the past," according to the 2005 charter.

Under new church policies, more than 6 million young people have been instructed about sexual abuse awareness and reporting. Credibly accused clerics are banned from the ministry. More than a million church workers and volunteers have undergone background checks, according to Sr. Mary Ann Walsh, deputy media relations manager for the bishops conference.

"The bishops have undertaken an extensive outreach to persons abused by clerics, apologizing for the harm committed and providing assistance such as psychological counseling," she said. "Bankruptcy is a last resort for a diocese as it seeks to balance its obligations to the people of the diocese and those who have been hurt by abusive clergy."

But while the Catholic bishops' charter for child protection is a commendable start toward addressing the abuse issue, Moynihan said, each of the 196 dioceses in the United States is free to implement it to whatever extent its bishop chooses. A recent audit found four dioceses had implemented none of the charter; others, only parts, he said. The audit itself relied on self-reporting by dioceses.

Moynihan said a lack of confidence in church management sparked formation of Voices of the Faithful in 2002. It now has 35,000 members in 35 countries. Its goals are to support abuse victims, support "priests of integrity," and reform the church's medieval management structure, he said.

The group also works in more than a dozen states to rewrite civil and criminal statute-of-limitation laws that often shield abusers and enablers from prosecution and lawsuits.

With its call to "keep the faith, change the church," the group boasts that its members are some of the Catholic faith's most devout followers. Its objectives do not attack church doctrine, but seek to involve more lay talent in management of church affairs to stop the crisis.

"You really have three choices. You can be a pew potato. You can walk. Or, you can stay and fight," Moynihan said.

The group takes off the gloves as it takes on the church, charging that the cover-up of abuse originated from the highest level. The same patterns of sexual abuse cover-up are repeated across the nation and around the world, Moynihan said. Other church critics share the belief. "Organizations cannot police themselves, especially not a monarchy," said David Clohessy, national director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests. "The Catholic Church hierarchy always has been, and still is, a rigid, ancient, secretive, all-male monarchy. It's inevitable, given this structure, there will be abuse and cover-up."

Clohessy said the bishops' new charter policies focus in the wrong places, such as lay church employees and young potential victims, rather than the root of the problem - church leadership.

"These reforms are not the solution to this problem," he said.

While Clohessy feels that many Catholics are content to ignore the issue, he believes that the church is paying a heavy and unseen price.

"You see many disgruntled Catholics going less, giving less, trusting less, believing less. All that is below the radar," Clohessy said. "Who counts who goes, who gives? The bishops."