

## Priests Council defends Egan

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An advisory council of New York priests yesterday severely criticized an anonymous letter that blames Cardinal Edward Egan for ruining priests' morale and has been the talk of the Archdiocese of New York.

Thirty-two priests from the 40-member Priests Council came to a special meeting called by Egan to discuss the letter and spent two hours with him, behind closed doors, at the cardinal's Manhattan residence.

When it was over, the council said in a statement that it was "appalled" by the anonymous letter, which was attributed to "A Committee of Concerned Clergy for the Archdiocese of New York." The letter called for priests to vote "no confidence" in Egan so that he would be called back to the Vatican when he turns 75 in April.

"A letter of this sort does a grave disservice to the entire Church, and to this Archdiocese in particular," the statement said. The Priests Council also defended Egan, saying, "We stand with him in confidence, and look forward to his continued ministry ... "

Monsignor Edward Weber, the vicar of Rockland County, who attended the meeting, said Egan opened the meeting with a prayer and then asked the priests to speak. "We did," Weber said. "Many people spoke. Then the cardinal replied."

Egan offered some comments on the letter, Weber said, but neither the cardinal nor the council spent much time on the particular criticisms in the letter. The letter, among other things, charged that Egan is not approachable, has focused too much on financial affairs, does not take advantage of the media and does not consult with his priests. "The letter has done damage," Weber said. "It's a big blow, appalling. But our goal remains to be of service to the archdiocese, the church and the people. We support our archbishop and are planning to move on and serve."

Joseph Zwilling, Egan's spokesman, had not talked to Egan about how the meeting went. "But I know the cardinal was glad to have this opportunity to speak with his Priests Council," Zwilling said.

Earlier yesterday, many priests who attended a funeral Mass in Chappaqua for Monsignor Charles Kelly were reluctant to talk about the impact of the letter. Those who did were divided.

"Anybody with two ears and two eyes knows there are problems in the diocese," said the Rev. Ralph Villani, associate pastor at St. Joseph's Church in New Rochelle. "Somebody decided that something had to be done about it. It might not be the best way. But as far as the criticism in the letter, everyone knows it's true and has been for years."

The Rev. Joseph Tierney, president of Cardinal Hayes High School in the Bronx and a former vocations director of the archdiocese under Egan, said Egan confronted the letter crisis directly. "I think His Eminence loves the priests of the diocese and wants the best for us," Tierney said. "He's doing the right thing, discussing it right away. I think something good will come of it."

The Rev. John Duffell, a former Yonkers pastor now in Manhattan, helped organize in 2002 a meeting of priests who felt abandoned during the sex-abuse scandal. Duffell, a close friend of the late Kelly's, held out hope after the funeral that relations between Egan and his priests would improve. "I hope good things will come from this letter, from people coming together," he said.

The statement: The Priests Council of the Archdiocese of New York met for two hours today with His Eminence, Edward Cardinal Egan. As representatives of the clergy of the Archdiocese, we came together to meet with our Archbishop and to discuss with him the letter that has circulated among some of the priests and in the media.

We are appalled that the letter was sent anonymously, and that it can and has been used by those who seek to damage the Church. As today's meeting has shown, it is possible to meet and discuss any issue with Cardinal Egan, and if any priest has a concern he can raise it and discuss it at any time. A letter of this sort does a grave disservice to the entire Church, and to this Archdiocese in particular.

We are also upset and dismayed that our Archbishop has been personally vilified in this manner. At today's meeting, the members of the Priests Council reiterated their support for His Eminence. We stand with him in confidence, and look forward to his continued ministry to the clergy, religious, and laity of the Archdiocese of New York.