

Sex-abuse review at crossroads

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NEW YORK — A majority of the nation's Catholic bishops probably remain committed to eliminating sexual abuse by clergy, but an influential minority of bishops may still seek to block the church's ongoing review process, a top lay official said yesterday.

Anne Burke, the interim chair of a National Review Board appointed by the bishops, said that she's hopeful that the nation's bishops will decide next month to begin a second audit of how dioceses are complying with a new church policy on sexual abuse.

"In my heart of hearts, I think that most want to move ahead," said Burke, a justice on the Illinois Court of Appeal. "But I don't know that for a fact. I don't know what the silent majority of bishops are thinking. I am still disturbed that a number of bishops made a concerted effort to derail the process of getting the audit done."

Burke discovered in March that several bishops, including Cardinal Edward Egan of New York, had sought to put off the review process until bishops could meet again in November. She wrote in a March 30 letter to Bishop Wilton Gregory, head of the U.S. bishops conference, that her 13-person review board felt "manipulated" and that the bishops risked backsliding on their commitment to stop abuse.

The bishops conference has since decided to discuss the audit at a closed-door conference next month.

In an interview before she addressed members of the lay group Voice of the Faithful, Burke said delaying a 2004 audit of all 195 dioceses could allow abuse and other injustices to go undiscovered. It would also allow the church to lose its momentum in fighting abuse, which started with the bishops' approval in 2002 of a get-tough policy, a "Charter on the Protection of Children and Young People."

"It's as simple as this: The charter is very clear about measuring compliance," Burke said. "We need to do audits as proof that the dioceses are complying. For some reason, Cardinal Egan and others sought to sandbag the process. Lay Catholics need to follow what happens and make sure the bishops don't back down."

Egan's spokesman, Joseph Zwilling, has said that Egan only wanted the bishops to have a chance to talk before moving ahead.

Voice of the Faithful, a lay group that was born in Boston in 2002 as a response to the sex-abuse crisis, arranged yesterday's conference at St. Paul the Apostle Church near Lincoln Center to bring attention to the review board's unclear fate. More than 400 Voice members from the tri-state area adopted a resolution calling on the bishops to, among other things, preserve and strengthen the National Review Board. There was little, if any, dissent.

"What's happening recently is a great demonstration of the bishops trying to control every aspect of church life," said Michael Hoynes, who leads a Voice chapter at St. Ann's Church in Ossining and is trying to start chapters at other suburban churches. "If they can control the review board, they will have a major victory. Lay involvement can either grow — or stop."

The Rev. Joseph O'Hare, the recently retired president of Fordham University, praised the review board for producing an informed, balanced critique of the church without calling for doctrinal changes. Some bishops have criticized the board for overstepping its authority and stressing its independence.

"Why a bishop, any bishop, would be unhappy with the fine job they're doing is beyond me," O'Hare said.

The review board released its first audit in January, finding that 90 percent of dioceses were fulfilling their obligations to halt abuse.

O'Hare also said that bishops who quietly tried to shelve the second audit have "communication problems" that have little to do with church matters.

"There's nothing doctrinal about it," he said, drawing laughs from his audience, which filled most of a vast, hot all-purpose room at St. Paul.

With the audit process suddenly in doubt, the review board met last week in Chicago with an empathetic committee of bishops that helped produce the charter. The committee promised to recommend that bishops move ahead with the review process.

"I feel better that they're standing behind us and recommending that the bishops take this on," said Pamela Hayes, a Manhattan lawyer who serves on the review board. "But I'm not that comfortable calling for a vote before you have the house counted. If we don't get a majority, we're back to where we started."

There was a sense among Voice of the Faithful members that the church is at a crossroads, not only in terms of dealing with sex abuse, but in terms of giving a voice to the laity. If the review board is quashed, many said, it will be harder to convince lay Catholics to speak out or join groups like Voice of the Faithful.

White hair has come to typify Voice of the Faithful gatherings. There were few people under 50 at yesterday's gathering, but many older believers who complained about not being able to hear the speakers.

"It's hard to have change unless you have people willing to insist on it," said Craig Dotlo, a retired FBI agent who is trying to start a Voice chapter at Transfiguration Church in Tarrytown. "If we can get our message out in a way that is constructive, we have a chance to help produce change in the Catholic Church."

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