

6-15-08 - 'Troublesome priest' will not be bowed

Gerard Wright, Los Angeles, The Australian

Geoffrey Robinson, now retired, outside St Joseph's Church, Enfield, NSW: "I had to choose between loyalty to the Pope, or loyalty to the victims."

AFTER he was introduced to the crowd of nearly 200 in the conference room of the motel, Bishop Geoffrey Robinson stood up and took off his jacket.

In other times and other circumstances, this would be a signal among gentlemen that fisticuffs would soon begin.

But Bishop Robinson, a retired auxiliary of the Catholic archdiocese of Sydney, is 70, and the only violence he does now is to the golf ball. But he also gives the impression of someone who would not only seek trouble, but meet it head on.

This explains why the mainstream Catholic Church is treating him as a troublesome priest.

As a bishop, he told the Thursday night gathering in the Los Angeles suburb of Culver City, he took an oath of loyalty to the Pope.

But he was a victim of abuse himself, and during the nine years that he investigated clerical sex abuse cases in Australia — as a member and then chairman of a church-appointed committee — he found himself trying to choose his side. "I had to choose between loyalty to the Pope, or loyalty to the victims," he said. "The victims of abuse were on one side, and on the other, total silence from Rome. Nothing. John Paul II simply gave no support. He had done nothing with this."

Later, he noted, in explaining how the millenniums-old culture of the church had to change, confrontation might be necessary.

It was notions such as this, and his book's questioning of church policy in matters such as the celibacy of priests, and the primacy and expansion of the Pope's power, that have earned Bishop Robinson a rebuke from the Australian bishops' conference.

In his speech, Bishop Robinson said he had received letters from the Vatican saying he was suspected of heresy while he was on the investigative committee.

Ten bishops, including Cardinal Roger Mahony, of Los Angeles, wrote to Bishop Robinson urging him to stay away.

Cardinal Mahony, whose archdiocese of Los Angeles has agreed to out-of-court settlements totalling \$US720 million (\$A766 million) for clerical abuse cases, wrote again in May after the Australian bishops' conference issued a public finding of doctrinal difficulties with Bishop Robinson's book.

His appearance in Culver City was the second-last of 15 events across the US, on a book tour with a difference.

The book, *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus*, was published in Australia last year and, according to its publisher, has sold more than 8000 copies. It is also on its second US print run.

But there was no welcome mat for the outspoken Australian. The DC Catholic website, based in the national capital of Washington, announced his arrival last month as "Disgraced Australian Bishop Geoffrey Robinson speaks in the Archdiocese of Washington".

The gatherings were small but spirited, with Bishop Robinson travelling between cities by plane, train and bus. He was given standing ovations at the beginning and end of his Culver City speech. "The book began as a response to abuse," he told the Los Angeles gathering. "Every page in it, every word in it is a response to that abuse."

But the book was also specific to Bishop Robinson's experience in Australia. To the palpable disappointment of the audience, he refused to comment on the state of the church in America.

"It's so different," he said. "So new. Please forgive me. It's not avoiding the issue. It's that things are so different to what I expected."

Later, questioned by an audience member, he relented slightly. "I'm surprised by all the lawsuits, the way money is used on both sides, where money seems to have been substituted for reaching out to people."

This towards the end of his week in a region, southern California, that had been ordered to make payouts totalling \$US1.2 billion as settlement of claims against clergy.

Bishop Robinson spoke for 70 minutes, a lecture dense with obscure fact, seasoned with opinion, spiced with dashes

of humour. At the end, after the ovation, he took questions, and the contrast could not have been more profound had they been in another language.

Victims of clerical abuse, recent and distant, identified themselves and recalled their experiences in angry tones that, in some cases, spared no detail.

"It was not sexual abuse," one woman said. "It was butchery, and will remain that way for the rest of my life."

The recollections were sincere, and saturated with the bitter memory. The woman continued: "Why would an educated man, supposedly a holy man who has sex issues — why do men like this fall down in the muck and mire? What do they do to them in the seminary to make them this way?"

Bishop Robinson stood quietly behind the lectern and offered the only answer he could, aware, most likely, that he could provide neither solace nor understanding.

"I don't know why it happens," he said. "That priests, God help us, descend to that level ... I have no explanation for how a priest can do this."