

Catholic investigator says lay people are key to recovery

Former head of board that looked into child abuse speaks at ND

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SOUTH BEND -- Illinois Appellate Justice Anne Burke, former head of the board that investigated child abuse by clergy in the Roman Catholic Church, said lay people will transform the church as it recovers from the scandal.

"The church needs to be reborn and it needs the heroic service of the laity to do it," she said Thursday at the University of Notre Dame.

"No more passive Catholics. And this is my mantra now."

About 40 people attended Burke's speech, sponsored by Call to Action Michiana, a Catholic reform-minded organization.

Burke served on the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops-sponsored National Review Board for the Protection of Children and Young People from June 2002, until fall 2004.

The board, made up of lay people, investigated and issued a report about the environment in the church hierarchy that led to, then largely covered up, about 11,000 reports of sexual abuse by priests. Board members interviewed hundreds of victims, law enforcement and church officials and concluded:

"It was the refusal of the institutional authority to act with justice," she said.

The abuse was by no means the fault of lay people, she said. But during the last 50 years, they left it up to ordained church officials to run parishes and schools, she said.

A result of the board's report was the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, which sets protocol for preventing sexual abuse and how to handle it if it does occur. Lay people need to be involved in the Catholic Church and make sure the charter is followed, she said.

"Be vigilant," she told the audience. "Be outspoken. Demand transparency. Know the charter."

She complimented Bishop John D'Arcy of the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend for attempting to expose abuse by clergy in his former Archdiocese of Boston more than 20 years ago. If leaders had listened to D'Arcy, then an auxiliary bishop, more than 100 victims would have been spared, she said.

"(D'Arcy) is a champion for justice," she said. "He was a breath of fresh air in a choking environment."

She spoke about "the downright vengeance," she witnessed among hierarchy during the investigation.

"It was an opportunity to see great virtue and great sin," she said.

When an audience member asked her how, as a woman, she was treated in a male-run institution, she replied that the word "interim" always preceded her title as chair of the board. The men who served before her and after her -- both for less time than she served -- were simply labeled "chair," she said.

After all of this, it is possible for the Catholic Church to heal, she said.

"We are, after all, a people who believe in an ongoing mystery of grace," she said.