

5-31-08 - Defying hierarchy, bishop urges change: Sex abuse stand inspires liberals

By Michael Paulson, Boston Globe Staff

DEDHAM - He is an unlikely hero for the Catholic left: a retired Australian bishop who served for years as an aide to the very conservative cardinal-archbishop of Sydney.

But now Bishop Geoffrey Robinson is under investigation by the Australian bishops conference, and multiple American bishops are trying to ban him from their dioceses after he published a book suggesting the Catholic Church examine the roles that power and sex played in the clergy abuse crisis.

The Catholic left - whose weakened influence was captured in a Time magazine essay this month headlined "Is liberal Catholicism dead?" - has rallied to this little-known bishop, packing his speaking appearances and driving up sales of his book.

On Thursday night, Robinson drew a crowd of about 550 to St. Susanna Church in Dedham, which he said was the largest audience he has drawn on a US speaking tour that began earlier this month. On Wednesday night, 110 showed up to hear him speak at the Paulist Center in Boston.

"If we are ever to look to the future with a clear conscience there must first be profound change within the church," Robinson told a rapt audience in Dedham at the start of a 60-minute talk, in which he questioned the extent of papal infallibility and the rationale for mandatory priestly celibacy. Perhaps most daringly, given the adulation directed toward Pope John Paul II since his death, Robinson repeatedly criticized the late pontiff for not taking enough action against clergy sexual abuse.

To those who despair of change within the church, he said, "Communism changed. Apartheid changed. It just may be the church's turn, too."

Some people traveled to Dedham from New Hampshire three hours early to make sure they could get a seat, and the event had to be moved from the basement to the church nave to accommodate the crowd. Every copy of Robinson's book sold out.

"The fact that this event attracted many hundreds of Catholics, large numbers of whom traveled many miles to attend, indicates to me that there is still significant dissatisfaction among the laity with the church's response to the sex and cover-up crisis to date," said Deacon Larry Bloom of the Dedham parish.

Robinson is one of the first bishops since the abuse crisis to break ranks publicly and call for a discussion of the most sensitive issues in the Catholic Church. And the hierarchy responded swiftly. The Australian Bishops Conference issued a statement declaring "doctrinal difficulties" with Robinson, in particular what it described as his "questioning of the authority of the Catholic Church to teach the truth definitively." A top Vatican official and several American bishops asked him to cancel his trip to this country.

"Canon 763 makes it clear that the Diocesan Bishop must safeguard the preaching of God's Word and the teachings of the church in his own Diocese," Cardinal Roger M. Mahony, the archbishop of Los Angeles, wrote in a letter to Robinson. "Under the provisions of Canon 763, I hereby deny you permission to speak in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles."

But where Robinson was denied Catholic venues, he found others.

On Long Island in New York, he spoke at a Unitarian Universalist parish, which waived its rental fee because, he said, the congregation viewed the bishop and his audience as "an oppressed minority." In New Jersey he spoke at a Lutheran church; in southern California he is speaking at a university, a community center, and a hotel.

In New England, the bishops have been quieter. Robinson spoke at Fairfield University, a Catholic college in southern Connecticut, as well as at St. Susanna Church and the Paulist Center. Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley has declined several requests for comment.

At the same time, Voice of the Faithful, the reform organization founded in Wellesley, last week gave Robinson its top honor as a "priest of integrity."

And Liturgical Press, the Catholic publishing house that is printing Robinson's book, "Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church," said it sold out its first run, of 3,000 copies, and is rushing a second run into print.

"What's significant here is that you've got a bishop who, once retired, decided he'd speak his own mind for a change - that rather than being part of the orchestra, he decided he wanted to do a solo," said the Rev. Thomas J. Reese, a senior fellow at the Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown University. "It's clear there's a real thirst among the laity and some priests for a more open discussion of issues in the church, and this is the kind of thing he's trying to stimulate. But it's not the kind of thing the Vatican or the majority of bishops want to see happen."

The sympathetic crowds coming to hear Robinson are clearly heartened by his outspokenness. In Dedham, he was given two standing ovations.

"He understands that the crux of the Roman Catholic problem lies squarely with the Stalinist-style power structure of the institutional church," said Peter Hartzel, a parishioner who lives in Dedham. "He honestly broached the 'hot' sexual issues with which the bureaucracy is unable to broach in a realistic manner."

Robinson, 70, has spent a considerable amount of time thinking about the abuse crisis and meeting with victims.

In 1994, he was named to a committee charged with coordinating the response of the Australian Catholic Church to clergy sexual abuse, and from 1997 until 2003 he was the committee cochairman. Robinson said he is also a victim of childhood sexual abuse, although not by a priest.

Of his work with victims he said, "It was an experience that changed me in so many ways that even if I wanted to I could not now go back to being the person that I was before."

Robinson said it is incumbent on Catholics to examine "institutional factors" that contributed to the abuse, as well as "the inadequate response to the abuse," which, he said, "created at least as much scandal as the abuse itself."

Robinson said that in an effort to prevent debate over mandatory celibacy, the Vatican had blamed gay priests for the abuse crisis.

"The scapegoat they found was priests whose sexual orientation was homosexual," he said. He called that argument "mistaken" and said, "Homosexuals are no more likely to offend than anybody else," and, "It's an avoidance of the truth in order to protect papal authority."

Robinson did not spell out solutions, but called for Catholics to use the moral force of the abuse issue to push for greater conversation about the church's teachings regarding power and sex.

"All church leaders have at the very least been through a profound humiliation and embarrassment over this issue," he said. "Deep within themselves they know that the popes have not given them the leadership they would have hoped for. However much they might pretend to the opposite, they also know that we still have a vast amount to do before we can look to the future with a clear conscience."

He praised Benedict XVI for his statements about abuse during his recent trip to the United States, but called on Benedict to make a public apology to victims from St. Peter's Basilica, surrounded by the cardinals.

And he called for the pope to commission a study of ways in which church teachings, including mandatory celibacy, may have contributed to the abuse, and for an investigation of institutional factors that contributed to the moving of abusive priests from one parish to another by bishops.

"He is living proof that bishops are not as united as they might be thought to be," said Paul Lakeland, a professor of Catholic Studies at Fairfield. "They try to paint him as a lone dissenter, a good man who has gone slightly off the rails, but I think there are lots of other bishops quietly cheering him on from the sidelines."