

10-20-07 - Del. priest honored for supporting abuse law

Reissmann stood against official church policy

By BETH MILLER, The News Journal, DE

The Rev. Richard A. Reissmann is no stranger to those on the outside looking in. The priest, who has served the Catholic Diocese of Wilmington for 44 years, has made it his business to find such people and stand beside them.

Reissmann, now 69, marched with black leaders in Selma, Ala., in the 1960s, urging the United States to treat its citizens equally. Later, he marched on behalf of the poor in Wilmington, where slumlords were ignoring cries for decent housing.

His walk to a podium in Dover last spring was no less significant to Delaware victims of sexual abuse. There, the pastor of St. John the Baptist/Holy Angels parish in Newark urged state lawmakers to eliminate a two-year civil statute of limitations for child sexual abuse and allow victims of older crimes the opportunity to sue those who had abused them.

"We must give the courageous ones the opportunity to make their case," he told the legislators. "If we as a society place money, power or privilege as superseding justice, then we are a society that has become tepid, weak and immoral."

The bill -- which was called the strongest in the nation by a New York law professor -- passed both chambers unanimously and became law in July.

Today, Reissmann will be in Providence, R.I., to receive a "Priest of Integrity" award from the lay Catholic group Voice of the Faithful, in recognition of his work on behalf of abuse victims. He is one of three priests to receive the award this year, one of only seven nationally to be recognized since the lay group was formed in 2002.

Ed Burke, a member of Reissmann's parish who was abused by a priest as a child, plans to be there. He contrasts Reissmann's approach with the pastor of the Iowa parish where Burke was abused by another priest in the 1940s.

"Both were my pastors for over 14 years," Burke said. "The first took the power of religion and the words of Jesus Christ and decided to lord it over his flock. The second decided to become a shepherd to his flock while attempting to make Jesus Christ the Lord of his life."

Reissmann is uncomfortable being called a "priest of integrity." He is painfully aware, he says, of his flaws and failures.

But those who have worked and worshipped with him say the title fits him perfectly.

Sister Helen Bellew, a nun with the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, was principal of Holy Angels School for 11 years and has known Reissmann for 17 years.

"He is, by far, the best pastor I have ever worked with," Bellew said. "I would say he's a priest to the core of his being, in the true sense of the word. He is totally committed to what the intent of the priesthood is -- servant leadership."

Eugene Consiglio, a "cradle Catholic" from Newark, also serves on the parish council. He, too, has known Reissmann for decades.

"Imagine what a priest goes through interfacing with families as they go through their life, good and bad," Consiglio said. "That man always approaches it in the most compassionate, prayerful way. ... I've seen him

when his heart was breaking, when he was burying children, comforting families, and I've seen him in Dover in front of anybody that wanted to watch, with the spotlight shining on him."

Reissmann does not seek the spotlight, said Carlene M. Sandella, a former nun who now is director of worship at the parish. But he doesn't shrink back when it is necessary to step into it.

"One might call Richard a true 'mover and shaker' within the church," she said. "Even though a real introvert, his priestly ministry has at many times called forth the characteristics of an extrovert."

As the clergy abuse scandal unfolded and victims of abuse came to him, Reissmann had to deal with faith that was shaken -- including his own.

"I would never put aside my faith," he said. "I've encouraged people to stay with their faith. The fact of the matter is, whether it's the church or civil institutions, no matter what, you're going to find failure and weakness."

Supporting victims

Voice of the Faithful, which has two Delaware chapters, was formed with three objectives: to support victims of clergy sexual abuse, to support priests of integrity, and to work toward reform in the church.

Some within the Catholic Church see the lay group as defiant of church authorities, with an agenda that contradicts church teaching. While Catholic Diocese of Wilmington authorities have expressed sorrow over abuses that occurred in the diocese, established strict new regulations to protect children, and offered assistance to victims, they have kept Voice of the Faithful at arm's length, forbidding the group from meeting in any diocese facility.

Reissmann was different.

"He supported us from the very beginning," said Bill Pare, vice president of the northern Delaware chapter. "He gave us enough courage to keep on meeting."

Diocese spokesman Robert G. Krebs acknowledged Reissmann's decades of ministry and said he is respected in his parish. However, he said, "It would not be appropriate for the diocese to comment on VOTF or this award since they are not a diocesan organization."

Since the scandal of sexual abuse of children by clergymen emerged in 2002, Reissmann has called for accountability in the Catholic church, urged Bishop Michael A. Saltarelli to release the names of credibly accused priests here, and attended meetings of Voice of the Faithful to support their efforts.

With that stand, he risked the same political consequences as anyone who publicly criticized the boss and the way he was handling a problem. Significant opportunities, favors and other forms of assistance could be jeopardized.

The decision to speak out was difficult for Reissmann, said Pat Ochonicki, a member of the parish council. But the parish supported his stand.

When he spoke out on the issue during Mass after the Philadelphia grand jury's scathing report on that archdiocese's situation in 2005, his congregation responded with a standing ovation.

But the disagreement with the diocese on how the Catholic Church has responded to the issue and its opposition to the Delaware legislation has been painful for Reissmann.

"I knew that in the twilight of my priesthood I would be separating myself in a large way from the diocese," Reissmann said. "That really saddened me. But I felt we had to protect the children of this state. I believe that

the legislation was important for this state from the standpoint of public and private institutions, so that many more of these predators would be known."

Sen. Karen Peterson, D-Stanton, sponsored the bill and welcomed Reissmann's support. But she stopped short of asking him to testify.

"I felt that was a personal decision for him and I knew there would be huge consequences for him," Peterson said. "His presence was extremely important -- seeing a priest there in a Roman collar drove home the point that there are many in the church, including the clergy, who think that it's time for justice for victims."

Reissmann wasn't the only diocesan priest who testified in Dover. The Rev. John Hynes, pastor of St. Catherine of Siena Church, testified against the bill, which he believes will produce an overwhelming financial burden for parishes as lawsuits emerge. Hynes had celebrated the Mass of Healing with Reissmann and still encourages people to go to VOTF.

"I disagreed with the majority of Voice of the Faithful and with Dick about the specific remedy that was needed," Hynes said. "But he and I met, we got together in a brotherly way and talked, and we both accepted each other's different stance."

David Clohessy, national director of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, said Reissmann's decision was not only courageous, but rare.

"Any priest can -- and many priests have -- said compassionate things about abuse victims. Frankly, that's not hard," Clohessy said. "But it takes tremendous courage to go before lawmakers and defy one's bishop and say that more predator priests and complicit bishops should be in courtrooms. I can count on one hand the priests who have done this. ... For many, many priests, the idea of being ostracized by their brother priests is terrifying, and frankly it is that fear that caused thousands of priests to turn a blind eye and stay quiet about suspicions of abuse for years and years, and still does."

Reissmann said his decision to testify produced one of the most rewarding moments of his ministry.

"It was a just and right moment," he said. "When you look at the lives of many of the saints, they stood up and got shot down. The Lord, because he stood up and attacked the religious institution of his day, he had to die. They weren't about to tolerate someone undermining their power and authority."

[Fr. Reissmann also concelebrated Mass at the Convention.]