
Egan short-circuiting reform, critics say

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The head of a national lay group charged with investigating the sexual abuse crisis in the Roman Catholic Church said Saturday that several prelates, including Cardinal Edward Egan of New York, are attempting to short-circuit reforms passed two years ago.

Illinois Appellate Judge Anne Burke, interim chairwoman of the National Lay Review Board, expressed particular concern about the fate of an annual audit that tracks whether church leaders are fulfilling promises to protect children.

"We have to do the audits or we'll be back to business as usual," Burke told about 500 members of Voice of the Faithful, a national reform group, in a meeting at St. Paul the Apostle Church in Manhattan. "There is no denying the magnitude of the crisis that has loomed into the life and spirit of the church."

At issue, Burke said, is backpedaling by some bishops on promises they made in Dallas in June 2002, at the height of the sex abuse scandals. Under enormous pressure from Catholics in the pews, they agreed then to take specific steps to protect children. And to ensure accountability, they also agreed to annual reports that would be based on an audit of every diocese in America.

But Burke said that no audit is being done for 2004 after several bishops, including Egan, urged a delay until the bishops could discuss the audit process at their next business meeting in November.

"Delaying an audit until late November would effectively kill it," Burke said, because 195 dioceses could not be visited in one month.

The future of the lay board -- from which four members, including Burke, are scheduled to resign in June -- also may be in question, she said.

A spokesman for Egan could not be reached Saturday. Several days ago, the spokesman, Joseph Zwilling, said the cardinal had issues he wanted to discuss with bishops about the audit process but would not be more specific. The cardinal was criticized in the 2003 audit for failing to be in full compliance.

Burke said that several bishops who recently met with the national lay group have agreed to bring up the issue of the audits next month when the bishops meet for a spiritual retreat in Denver.

"Now it is wait-and-see," she said. "If the full body of bishops vote in favor of the proposal, then it will move ahead quickly."

Another member of the panel, New York lawyer Pamela Hayes, urged Catholics in the pews to be vigilant of the reform process.

"We are no longer an immigrant church that takes everything the hierarchy says as gospel," Hayes said. "We have to ... speak truth to power."

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