

9-8-08 - Head of bishops' panel criticizes clerics

By Michael Paulson, Boston Globe Staff

The Illinois Supreme Court justice who headed a board chosen by the Catholic bishops to assist them with preventing clergy sexual abuse accuses one of the nation's top Catholic prelates of dishonesty and sharply criticizes a second in Kerry Kennedy's new book, "Being Catholic Now," which is being released tomorrow.

The two cardinals named by Justice Anne M. Burke, Francis E. George of Chicago and Edward M. Egan of New York, both issued statements to the Globe rejecting the criticism.

Burke, who was interim chair of the National Review Board for the US Conference of Catholic Bishops for two years, details the scope of her concern about the American bishops in an interview with Kennedy, a daughter of Robert F. Kennedy, in her book.

She says the board "started having problems with individual cardinals and bishops who thought we were too aggressive," and that "bishops got away with concealing crime," and "just when you think these bishops are getting it, they turn around and do something that in any other enterprise would result in their own dismissal."

She also alleges that, after Frank Keating, former governor of Oklahoma, was forced to resign as board chairman because he compared the bishops to the Mafia, the bishops declined to make her the permanent chairwoman because "there was no way they were going to appoint a woman to the position of chair."

Burke's strongest criticism is aimed at George, who is now the president of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops. She says the cardinal withheld from her the fact that he was housing in his residence a priest accused of abuse in Delaware. She says she was "furious at his casual attitude" and that "the cardinal wasn't honest with me. Perhaps he was not honest with himself."

Asked by the Globe about Burke's comment, George said in an e-mail that he allowed the Delaware priest to stay in his residence during a visit to Chicago, and that "to the best of my knowledge, I have been honest in every public and private statement I have made about the sexual abuse issue."

"I stated publicly that there was no priest in ministry in Chicago who had against him a substantiated claim of sexual abuse of a minor," he said. "That statement was true when I made it and it is true now."

The priest from Delaware, he said, "was never in ministry here. He was someone I had known for several years who was coming to Chicago for a few days on business. At the time, I was unaware of all the details of his situation; but since, he let me know that a question had been raised about his past. I invited him to stay in my house rather than a

parish when he came to Chicago while his own diocese was deciding whether or not he should be in ministry."

Burke's criticism of Egan is also pointed.

"Cardinal Edward Egan was offended by our insistence for independence," she says. "I also think he was intimidated by the thoughts of fifty former FBI agents doing our questioning. His animosity reached an absurd level when he publicly uninvited us from attending the Cardinal's Annual Gala in New York [an Order of Malta dinner]."

A spokesman for Egan, Joseph Zwilling, disputed Burke's characterizations.

"The Cardinal never had or expressed an opinion on the matter of the so-called 'dependence or independence' of the Review Board," Zwilling said.

"Throughout the process of audits in which former FBI agents were involved, the Archdiocese and the Cardinal Archbishop cooperated without hesitation. There was never any occasion for intimidation and at the last meeting the auditors were very complimentary regarding the Archdiocese and the Cardinal Archbishop."

And, Zwilling said, "the Cardinal never invited the advisory board to the Order of Malta dinner, and therefore could not dis-invite them. When asked if they should be invited, he responded that in his opinion it would not be fitting because the Order of Malta had nothing to do with the sexual abuse crisis."