

8-13-08 - Scandal in Chicagoland

By David Gibson, BeliefNet.com

The Chicago Tribune has the disturbing deposition by Cardinal Francis George and other coverage detailing what is being described as a "cover-up" of an abusive priest--but AFTER George presided over the passage of the 2002 charter to protect children, and AFTER he said he had cleared out any abusive priests in accord with the charter. And George is now present of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and was the churchman who welcomed Pope Benedict XVI to the U.S. in April and assured everything was being done to make sure the scandal never happened again. This comes out in the wake of this week's civil settlement with victims. Here's the Trib on a couple of cases, namely convicted child molester Daniel McCormack:

In his deposition, George revealed under oath the steps, missteps and lies that led to McCormack's tenure at St. Agatha years after initial allegations of misconduct surfaced during his seminary days. According to the document, as many as 23 people have alleged abuse by McCormack, who is now serving a 5-year prison sentence.

The allegations against McCormack spurred the archdiocese to commission an independent 2006 audit of what went wrong in the case.

In the deposition, the cardinal also detailed church deception and cover-up in the Bennett investigation--facts omitted from that audit.

Standing before television cameras Tuesday, the cardinal once again said he was sorry for not acting sooner and promised more transparency.

"In the sense I'm responsible for this archdiocese, I have to accept the blame," George said.

The eight-hour, 305-page transcript of George and Anderson taken in January displayed a wide range of emotions from remorse to defensiveness. In the sometimes confrontational exchange, the cardinal also blamed other institutions for allowing McCormack to go free, including police, prosecutors and child welfare officials.

He defended the archdiocese's actions regarding the delayed removal of Bennett from Holy Ghost parish in South Holland in February 2006. Bennett's removal was prompted by the widening McCormack scandal.

In the investigation of Bennett, the deposition finds the cardinal and church officials received four detailed allegations of sexual abuse dating back to 2002. But they did not act to remove Bennett from his church until 2006, despite two recommendations from the archdiocese review board months earlier, according to the deposition.

Instead, Bennett was placed under the supervision of a monitor, Rev. Leonard Dubi, who apparently was Bennett's close friend. George disregarded a recommendation by an archdiocese review board to remove Bennett in October 2005 and again in November, attributing the delay to the priest's lack of representation by a canon lawyer.

By the time he was removed, the deposition reveals, more than a dozen allegations had mounted against the priest--a fact the archdiocese failed to tell parishioners and the public.

George's testimony and church correspondence on Bennett also indicated that the archdiocese's vicar for priests, Rev. Edward Grace, himself a lawyer, played a role in coaching clergy to deny allegations.

In 2002, a male victim voluntarily underwent a lie-detector test that showed he was telling the truth. The cardinal says he never received that information. In 2003, a female victim tells archdiocese officials specific details about freckles on Bennett's scrotum and a round birthmark on his back that led an archdiocese review board to conclude that sexual abuse "did happen."

Grace advised Bennett on how to handle the victim's knowledge of his private parts, according to a memo. According to the testimony, Grace told Bennett in November 2005 to get a note from a dermatologist questioning whether the scrotum marks might be "aging marks" and may not have been present at the time of the allegation.

The victims' attorney, Anderson, asks the cardinal about the freckles matter, saying: "Grace is--looks like he's trying to explain it away. Do you read it that way?"

George responds: "It could be read that way."

The cardinal said Grace and George Rassas--then vicar general, now auxiliary bishop--also withheld information about allegations before McCormack's promotion to a supervisory role days after his August 2005 arrest, actions for which a letter of reprimand was placed in their file.

At several points in the questioning about Bennett, Anderson asked the cardinal whether he is more concerned about the rights of accused priests and the legal process than he is about protecting children at risk.

This could explode, especially if criminal charges come in under the statute of limitations. It could also seriously undermine much of the progress that has been made. Let's face it: most pew Catholics are not people, but sheeple-people who are sheep, who will do what they're told to do, mostly because they seem to have no will of their own due to general indifference, hardheartedness, or something that I can't put my finger on right now. All of what Little Bear said is right, only he didn't use my terminology. And sadly, the term 'sheeple' applies to most North Americans.

There should be protests aplenty, mass refusals to let things stand as they are, and mass resignations from Catholicism, but the sheeple can't seem to get off of their spotty, crud-encrusted behinds to do anything except go about their lives, either wholly or in part because of the lazy corporate 'liberal' (ha! It's completely neoconservative) media, who can't even do their jobs with regards to Iraq and Afghanistan (BTW, where is the church on these issues?) Moreover, as soon as the true news starts to come up, the church and the Establishment divert attention by focusing on gay marriage and abortion, which the Catholic sheeple lap up like so much sweet cream or Kool-Whip. Oh, they can be concerned with child sexual abuse, but only and always in the context of art that they can barely understand, which they then attack as directed by law enforcement and the neo-con establishment. Meanwhile, the church can allow priests to molest children at will, and shuffle them around when the heat's turned up.

As with the Iraq/Afghanistan war and the environment, so with this issue. What else is new?

Posted by: Neville Ross | August 18, 2008 4:08 PM

With all due respect, Tom, I am an "insider" who works with hundreds and hundreds of Catholics over a wide area. Most "pew Catholics" don't know what is going in other dioceses within their own state, never mind across the country or world. Diocesan newspapers are quite restrictive in what they publish about what is going on in the Catholic world, especially if there is a controversy where cardinals are not looking as clean as the pristine snow. And those Catholics who don't get on Catholic web-sites like this one---have a really restricted point of view.

Secondly, your comment about "the Catholic Church is not a democracy" is stale bread. The truth is that throughout history, Church thought and behavior have always been influenced by the culture at large. The

Church is "the People of God". It does not just belong to the hierarchy. In America, as well as in other democratic nations, the people DO expect their Church to be more democratic.

Here are some statistics: In parish life in the United states, about eighty percent of Roman Catholics want a voice in spending of the parish income. After all, they are paying the bills. And over seventy percent would like to have a voice in the appointment of priests to a parish. Research conducted by Bernard J. Lee, *The Catholic Experience of Small Christian Communities* (New York: Paulist Press. 2000) p. 68. But this is on a parish level---which is where most Catholics are really concerned.

To achieve real changes in the Church, all Catholics need to look beyond just their parishes, and exercise their baptismal calling and demand change, demanding accountability of their pastors and bishops, and making their voices known to their bishops.