

Trust -- Questions renewed about diocese's seeming secrecy

By JANE GARGAS, YAKIMA (WA) HERALD-REPUBLIC, January 7, 2007

It's the answer as well as the question.

Trust.

Faith relies on it.

But how much trust should there be?

The subject of trust has become a matter of intense debate among some parishioners in the Catholic Diocese of Yakima concerning decisions made about clerics and their conduct.

Trust forms the underpinnings of the church, but when nuances exist, and rumor meets rancor, questions arise. The clergy sex scandal that erupted nationally in the Catholic Church in 2002 has left some local congregants contemplating how candid their church should be.

In particular, they wonder how much a bishop should disclose to churchgoers when allegations are leveled against a cleric, and how much, if any, oversight should be given to the attendant diocesan decisions.

Yet, any questioning clashes against a fundamental understanding that parishioners should have inherent faith in their bishop.

"It's always, 'Keep your mouth shut and just trust the bishop,'" said an ex-diocesan employee who asked not to be named.

The issue of trust has repeatedly been raised by some local Catholics over a 2003 incident concerning a priest whose computer contained photographs of nude boys. He was the focus of a criminal investigation, but no charges were ever filed. He left Yakima in 2004.

Even though the incident happened more than three years ago, emotions churned again recently when news broke that the priest is working in the Archdiocese of St. Louis, where he is an associate pastor in a parish with an elementary school.

Yakima members of a Catholic group advocating reforms in the church, Voice of the Faithful, are troubled over the priest's assignment.

"That tells me there's a good possibility that St. Louis doesn't know the whole history of (the priest's) imprudent behavior," said Robert Fontana, VOTF coordinator.

When asked what documentation Yakima's diocese sent to St. Louis about the priest, Monsignor Ron Metha, diocese chief of staff, said he didn't know because he wasn't involved in the process.

Bishop Carlos Sevilla declined through a spokesperson to comment on diocesan affairs, saying he lacked confidence in the Yakima Herald-Republic. A spokesman for the Archdiocese of St. Louis also wouldn't comment.

Russ Mazzola of the Diocesan Lay Advisory Board said Sevilla has "acted prudently" in the matter.

But the man who discovered the photographs, an employee of the diocese at the time, disagreed. The overriding goal of the diocese, he believes, was to protect the priest.

Requesting that his name not be used, the ex-employee characterized the episode as "kill the messenger."

The incident began when the former employee was asked to fix the priest's computer in September 2003. After making a minor repair, he watched as photographs of nude boys began printing on the printer. The priest was subsequently sent for treatment to a Catholic facility in St. Louis, which eventually concluded that he posed no threat to children and could return to the ministry.

He came back to Yakima in spring 2004 and was assigned to St. Paul Cathedral.

Several months later, the ex-employee wrote to the bishop, expressing concern that the priest had returned to the ministry even though he was still under investigation in connection with possessing the photos.

Sevilla wrote back, "I'm not sure it was accurate for you to say that he was in possession of those photos since, as I understand it, you printed them."

Reading those words, the ex-employee felt an immediate chill: "I took that to mean they (diocesan officials) were undermining my veracity. I was intimidated."

He insists that the case was never solely about the photos. That incident represented just one of what he called several "red flag behaviors." For instance, he said, employees in one of the priest's former parishes expressed concerns about the priest's conduct to a lay advisory board investigator.

However, Mazzola of the advisory board reported that the investigation into those concerns proved groundless.

The ex-employee believes the situation could have been much less acrimonious had it been handled differently from the beginning, with the bishop openly telling parishioners that their priest was being sent off for evaluation because photos of nude boys had been found.

"That one act would have built trust," he said.

But not everyone agrees.

Tom Frey, a Seattle attorney representing the diocese, said a bishop has two choices if there's a credible claim against a cleric.

"You can tell the parish right up front, but that's a little like capital punishment, where you can't bring it back," Frey argued. "Even if it's proved beyond a reasonable doubt that the priest wasn't guilty, you can't get a reputation back."

The other choice is to say nothing until an investigation is complete, Frey said.

While indicating he favors the second option, Frey noted, "I don't know what the answer is. It's not easy."

It should be, countered Barbara Blaine, national president of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests.

"You go before the church and say there's an allegation against this person, and he is stepping aside while we investigate.

"Otherwise, silence and secrecy fester."

Blaine also advocates openness to validate victims, if there were any, and to protect others who might be vulnerable.

Two local parishioners basically agree that candor is preferable to silence.

Omer Gress, a longtime member of St. Joseph's Church, said, "My personal reaction is the congregation should be told why if a priest is removed; it shouldn't be covered up."

But the 79-year-old Gress said it's not as clear-cut when accusations aren't egregious enough for the bishop to send the priest away.

Margaret O'Claire, a Voice of the Faithful member who attends Holy Family Church, believes protecting children is paramount.

"So much is done in secret here," she said. "It erodes trust when a congregation isn't told what has happened to a priest."

That's because authority figures should be held to maximal accountability, according to Blaine: "We expect our leaders to function on a higher plane; whether it's innuendo or pornography or whether there's touching or implicit behavior -- it's wrong."

Fontana of VOTF contends that the Catholic Church changed forever four years ago when news emanated from Boston that pedophile priests had been moved from church to church, even though church officials knew of their crimes.

"Bishops say that it's their sole responsibility to decide if a cleric, who has committed an offense, can be returned to the ministry. I say that's not adequate anymore," Fontana declared. "'Trust me' isn't working."

The ex-employee who found the photos believes the church hierarchy is flawed because there's no allowance for checks and balances. A bishop isn't beholden to anyone else in the diocese, the state or the country, the ex-employee pointed out.

"The bishop answers only to God and the pope," he said.

The entire church is structured so that authority is not to be challenged, seconded Blaine of the Survivors Network.

"You never question Father," she said, stressing that's one reason why it's difficult for a victim of cleric abuse to step forward.

In addition to the case of the priest with nude photos, VOTF members have questioned the handling of two other incidents in the Yakima Diocese -- one in 2002, the other in 2004.

The first, in a parish near Wenatchee, concerned a volunteer who oversaw the altar server program involving children. The man admitted to a church official that he had sexually fondled two girls on several occasions. None of the incidents occurred in the church, and the girls weren't altar servers at the time.

The official took the volunteer to the police, but because the girls' families declined to press the case, the man was never criminally charged. No one in the families of the victims was offered counseling by the diocese, nor were the altar servers or their parents polled to determine if there were any victims in that group.

Mazzola said counseling wasn't extended to the victims because the man wasn't an employee and the claimed abuse didn't occur when he was acting as a representative of the church.

Nor does Mazzola think it makes sense to query the altar servers about possible abuse.

"We can't go out and have an investigator ask any child under 18 if he was molested. I think you'd create more harm and emotional instability if you did that," he said.

Teresa Kettelkamp, executive director of the Office of Child and Youth Protection, part of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington, D.C., offers guidance to dioceses in handling allegations of sexual abuse by clerics.

In a situation where the perpetrator isn't officially tied to the church, it's up to the bishop to decide how to proceed, she said.

But Kettelkamp thought it would have been reasonable to talk to parents to find out if there might have been other victims.

"I never assume there's not others," she said.

The second case in question happened in Sunnyside two years ago. When a priest abruptly moved away, diocese officials told the parish that he'd left to "work on important personal issues."

Mazzola said that the priest had engaged in behavior with an adult male that was "inappropriate, but not against the law that I'm aware of."

However, Mazzola said he was "absolutely confident there was no physical contact."

The man is no longer functioning as a priest, Mazzola said, and is not working for a diocese as a cleric, as far as he knows.

Since the case doesn't fall under the church's policy of protecting minors, he thinks it's the bishop's choice whether he tells the congregation why the priest was removed.

That, however, is not how Sunnyside parishioner Tom Gehlen sees it. When a priest summarily leaves, parishioners should get all the pertinent facts, he believes.

"If information were more forthcoming, it would be a better diocese," Gehlen said. "Healing doesn't come with rumors," he added.

Openness also provides a forum for parishioners to give any information they might have about the case, Gehlen said.

A statement from VOTF concurred.

"Lay people pay priest's salaries, medical insurance and retirement. Certainly, when one of our priests abuses his position through sexual abuse of a minor or sexual misconduct with an adult, and he is removed from his position, we laity have a right to know."

Regarding issues of trust in the church, it all comes down to accountability, said the ex-diocese employee who discovered the nude photos on the priest's computer.

More oversight is the answer, he said. In his view, the lay advisory board has no power because it can only make recommendations to the bishop.

"The way it is now, there's intransigence, obfuscation and stonewalling. The arrogance of power in the diocese will continue until we have an advisory group that is truly consultative," he argued.

Congregants have been too trusting for too long, Fontana seconded. He contends that there's a systemic problem in the church.

"The honor system doesn't work for Enron, for tax collectors or on the highway," he said. "And it doesn't work in the church."
