

April 29, 2002

Section: Local State

Page: 11A

Local Catholics angry, disgusted

Pat Carome

Staff

RRS;Metro

Parishioners want the church to deliver stronger consequences to pedophile priests.

By PAT CAROME

Rockford Register Star

Many local Roman Catholics want priests who have molested children immediately and permanently banned from church life and turned over to police - stronger consequences than proposed by cardinals at a Vatican summit on the sex-offender priests last week.

Some church-goers at Mass Saturday night and Sunday morning were disgusted with Catholic officials for failing to swiftly confront pedophilia in the priesthood.

"Quickly enough would have been 20 years ago," said Michael Watt, who belongs to St. James Catholic Church in Belvidere. "Acts of this type are crimes, and they have to be tried as crimes."

Court cases and molestation allegations against Catholic priests are erupting across the country. More than 170 priests suspected of abusing children have resigned or were taken off duty in 28 states since January. Five priests have been taken off duty or resigned in Illinois.

Cardinals left the landmark conference in Rome talking of "zero tolerance" but disagreeing on its definition. Also, "notorious" repeat offenders would be banned from all church roles.

They'll hammer out a church policy in June at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops meeting in Texas.

The Rockford diocese already has acted. Measures enacted 15 years ago call for any priest guilty of sexual abuse to be removed from parish service, said diocesan spokesman Owen Phelps.

Priests at several Rock River Valley parishes spoke to their congregations about fund-raising and following Christ's example last weekend, instead of the scandal. But the Rev. Mark Campobello of St. James Church in Belvidere and the Rev. David Beauvais of St. James Church in Rockford addressed the priest debacle in previous weeks.

"It's a really traumatic time for our church," Beauvais said. "My goal is to serve as a comfort for the people. What I consistently say to the people is we're going to be OK. Our kids are safe here."

Campobello's church distributed Bishop Thomas Doran's address outlining local measures.

Some allegations against priests are decades old and cannot be prosecuted, Phelps noted. Keeping some offenders in the church is one way of safeguarding the public. "You could place them virtually on house arrest, if you wanted to."

George Morales of St. Patrick Church in Rockford feels strongly about removing offending priests.

"Anyone who commits child abuse does not belong in that position. They should kick him out," Morales said.

Other parishioners believe the media is picking on the Catholic Church.

"If it were the Episcopalian or the Lutheran church, it wouldn't be that big of a deal," Irene Dyer said as she left Mass at Holy Family Church on Highcrest Road in Rockford. She and others at Holy Family said they would not hesitate to send their children on field trips with Catholic priests.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

Contact: pcarome@smtp.registerstar tower.com 815-987-1345