

Rockford Register Star

Estimated printed pages: 3

June 6, 2002

Section: Life Style

Page: 1B, 6B

Diocese gauges scandal reaction in closed sessions

Eddy Montville

Staff

RRS;Metro

By EDITH C. WEBSTER

Rockford Register Star

ROCKFORD - Bishop Thomas Doran recently held a series of emotional "listening" sessions over the church's sex abuse scandal, but most of the diocese's 370,000 Catholics were not invited.

The six organized meetings took place May 22 through June 1. They were announced Friday, May 31, in the diocese's official newspaper, The Observer.

Officials kept the meetings small and closed because they feared large, open sessions might turn into shouting matches where few people got the opportunity to speak, diocese spokesman Owen Phelps said. Such meetings have been held in cities like Milwaukee and Chicago.

"One of Bishop Doran's concerns was how this issue would be used to advance some people's agendas. That wasn't going to serve the intended purpose," Phelps said. "We wanted focus groups, with diversity in geography, men and women, lay and clergy, and in terms of age."

Local Catholics were glad to hear about the sessions but had mixed feelings about how they were organized.

"They were smart to keep the meetings small, because otherwise they would get people with an ax to grind," said Robert A. Bracken, an ordained deacon at Holy Family Church.

The bishop deserves credit for making a good-faith effort to get feedback from throughout the diocese, said children's author and publisher John Gile, but many others need to be heard.

"They have access through e-mail, ordinary mail and phone, but when we have a crisis like this, a more public forum might be more effective," said Gile of St. Peter Cathedral. "Concerns sometimes fester. People who feel understood no longer remain hostile."

Dialogue is always helpful with issues like this, said Valeri DeCastris, a parishioner at St. Anthony Padua.

"People need to vent, and they need to give feedback to their church," DeCastris said. "Having been to lots of hearings that got out of hand, I can get (diocesan officials') point, but I think they need to reach out more to the community."

When the nation's 288 bishops convene next week in Dallas, they will debate a proposal unveiled Tuesday by the Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Abuse of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. It calls for a zero-tolerance policy against priests who molest children in the future and a two-strikes-you're-out policy for those guilty of past abuse.

The proposal and the listening sessions are in response to months of news about pedophile priests and coverups.

Since the beginning of the year, 225 of the nation's 46,000 Catholic priests have quit or been dismissed, and civil suits involving millions of dollars in damages have been filed.

Rockford officials gathered about 100 people in five groups throughout the 11-county diocese for reaction.

The only Rockford sessions were with an honors religion class at Boylan High School and a bishop's advisory council of clergy and lay people. Other sessions were with lay leaders in Crystal Lake, a men's group in St. Charles, senior citizens and young parents in Freeport, and parish council members in Aurora.

Phelps characterized the participants as "thoughtful but passionate." One of those most common concerns was whether a priest would be removed after a first offense.

"There was a lot of talk in favor of zero tolerance, but just as many said this is a very complex thing," Phelps said. "There was pain, anger and sadness, yet a recognition that we should deal with people fairly. Priests should be treated the same as everyone else."

Contact: ewebster@smtp.registerstar.tower.com 815-987-1394.

Thomas Doran

John Gile

Valeri DeCastris

MUGS

BREAKOUT BOX

Where to write

Catholics who missed the listening sessions can send comments by mail to Consult, Diocese of Rockford, 921 W. State St., Rockford, IL 61102 or by e-mail to Consult@rockforddiocese.org.

Diocesan officials said any mail or e-mail received by Friday, June 7, will be given to Bishop Thomas Doran before he leaves for the national bishops' meeting.

What's next

Rockford's Thomas Doran and nearly 300 other U.S. bishops will vote on the "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People" Thursday, June 13, through Saturday, June 15, at their annual meeting in Dallas.

Upcoming coverage

Register Star religion reporter Edith C. Webster will be covering the bishops' conference next week in Dallas. Look for advance coverage Tuesday through Thursday and live coverage Friday through Sunday.
