Vatican

View from the Vatican

German Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Fa

German Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, is pictured in a 2002 file photo. (CNS photo from Catholic Press photo)



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Under intense national scrutiny after the groundbreaking reporting on clergy sexual abuse and cover-up in the Boston Archdiocese in 2002, the U.S. Catholic bishops created a new lay-run review board to advise their national conference on how to better protect children and vulnerable persons from abuse.

One of the group's first tasks was to thoroughly investigate the nature of the scandal, in view of an eventual first-of-its-kind report that would detail the enormous scope of abuse in the U.S. church across some five decades. And a key ally in the task? None other than Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the future Pope Benedict XVI.

Anne Burke, a former chief justice of the Illinois Supreme Court who served as interim chair of the bishops' National Review Board from 2002-04, recalled the tale in a phone interview with me on Jan. 3, two days ahead of Benedict's funeral on Jan. 5.

In December 2003, members of the review board traveled to Rome to meet with Vatican officials to both brief them on what they were hearing, but also to voice their frustrations that so many members of the U.S. hierarchy seemed to be stonewalling their requests for interviews and access to their files.

Ratzinger, then head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, originally said he was unable to meet with the group while they were in town, but soon after they returned to the states, he wrote requesting that they return to Rome to see him.

One month later, Burke — along with fellow review board members William Burleigh and Robert Bennett — returned here to the Eternal City. When they were invited inside the doctrinal office, they were stunned to see that Ratzinger had assembled an entire team of his officials to take part in the meeting.

"We told him things that horrified him," recalled Burke.

When I asked her to recall her reaction on April 19, 2005, when Ratzinger appeared on the loggia of St. Peter's as Benedict and the new head of the global Catholic Church, she didn't hesitate: "It gave me hope."

Hope, she said, was in short supply at the time.



Anne Burke, then-acting chairwoman of the National Review Board, addresses the media at the release of a national study and separate analysis of the clergy sexual abuse crisis Feb. 27, 2004, at the National Press Club in Washington. Burke, a former chief justice of the Illinois Supreme Court, spoke to NCR Jan. 3, ahead of Pope Benedict XVI's funeral on Jan. 5. (CNS/Bob Roller)

When the U.S. bishops met in Dallas in 2002 to adopt their "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People" and "Essential Norms for Diocesan/Eparchial Policies Dealing with Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests or Deacons," one component of the charter was the commissioning of a report by the review board to offer a "comprehensive study of the causes and context of the current crisis."

"The Board will also commission a descriptive study, with the full cooperation of our dioceses/eparchies, of the nature and scope of the problem within the Catholic Church in the United States, including such data as statistics on perpetrators and victims," the charter stated.

Burke said that the pledged cooperation, as outlined in the charter, was anemic.

"We had assembled over 100 former FBI agents and investigators, but so many dioceses and eparchies just wouldn't work with us," she recalled. "But we knew we weren't going to issue this report unless we did due diligence."

When members of the board decided to take their case to Rome, one priest cautioned Burke that it was a futile endeavor, she said.

"You'll never get to Rome," she recalls him telling her. "If you mention you're going to Rome to the bishops' conference, they'll put the clamps on it."

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Still, they persisted and when in January 2004, they entered into the Holy Office, as the congregation was long known, they came with "files on bishops and priests we knew about, but we speculated he didn't know," Burke said of Ratzinger.

"When the meeting began, we just kind of took charge. And it was obvious he didn't get half the information that he should have," she added, saying that many U.S. bishops' weren't sending proper information to Rome.

After going through a series of cases, Burke said Ratzinger intently listened for over two hours, careful not to show too much emotion, but occasionally bowing his head in disbelief, and then eventually asking how he could help.

"None of us on the board are wallflowers," she said, highlighting that the board was made-up of well-known lawyers and business professionals. "No one was going to jeopardize their reputation and simply say 'yes, your eminence.' "

"We told him we wanted some fraternal correction," said Burke, who said they asked Ratzinger to send a letter to every U.S. bishop asking them to adhere to the charter and cooperate with the Review Board.

One month later, in February 2004, Ratzinger did just that, sending a letter to each U.S. bishop urging their cooperation. (Today, that letter and Burke's other records are in DePaul University's archives).

When the board's final report was issued later that year, no one at the bishops' conference or other members of the U.S. hierarchy received their findings in advance, said Burke. The only person they sent it to on the eve of its release was to Ratzinger in Rome.

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As pope, Benedict would go on to get mixed marks for his handling of abuse — receiving praise for removing hundreds of predator priests from the clerical state and dealing with some of the church's most notorious abusers, such as Legionaries of Christ founder Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, but also being criticized for not setting up clear systems to hold bishops accountable for their own failings.

"The church is still hurting," said Burke. While she said she holds Ratzinger in high esteem for the progress made under his watch as pontiff, she also said that: "Intellectually, the hierarchy doesn't believe they need the laity."

Twenty years after the review board began knocking on doors in Rome and demanding action, she says the task of pushing for change must continue.

"We have to remind the hierarchy that this is Christ's church that needs the laity," said Burke. "It's more serious now than it was in 2002 when we first started this."

This story appears in the **The Ratzinger/Benedict XVI legacy** feature series. View the full series.