

Church reformers have second thoughts on pope

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Robert S. Bennett and Justice Anne M. Burke at a meeting of the National Review Board in 2004. (CNS file photo)

To many advocates of reform in the Catholic church, the election of conservative Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as pope in April 2005 was a blow to hopes the Vatican would change positions on gender, sexuality, divorce, and the church hierarchy.

Yet the result encouraged three prominent reformers who were appointed to a U.S. bishops' National Review Board. The three American Catholics -- a judge, an attorney and a newspaper publisher -- were concerned mainly with the clergy sex scandal.

They had met with Ratzinger in his Vatican office in 2004 for an extensive discussion on the cover-ups of clergy sex abuse of children, and came to view Ratzinger as the best churchman anywhere on the issue. A year later, when he became Pope Benedict XVI, they were often quoted praising him in American news articles.

But that was then.

The recent clamor over media revelations about two priests whose abuse cases were adjudicated under Ratzinger's watch have led two of the three panel members who met with Ratzinger to reconsider their views.

"I felt, as did some of the other members, that he would be 'on' this issue," said Illinois Supreme Court Justice Anne Burke, a panel member from 2002 through 2005. "So for me to be reading this ... has been very disheartening."

Three weeks ago, a German newspaper revealed that in 1980, church authorities in the Archdiocese of Munich and Freising, where Ratzinger was archbishop, had let a molester of children return to ministry after therapy. The priest later molested again.

Then, The New York Times reported an elderly priest from Milwaukee who had abused scores of deaf children was spared a canonical trial after pleading with Ratzinger in May 1998 to let him die as a priest. (He died four months later.)

"What is coming out now is enormously troubling," said Washington power attorney Robert Bennett. "I'm enormously disappointed that this is such a worldwide problem."

The U.S. scandal centered on revelations that bishops covered up for priests who had sexually abused minors by failing to report the crimes to law enforcement and not telling their new parishioners about their pasts.

Starting in 2001, Ratzinger, as prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, reviewed each case file of every priest facing accusations. So when Burke, Bennett and newspaper publisher William Burleigh met with Ratzinger on Jan. 25, 2004, across from him and six staff members in his Vatican office, they were probably talking to the best informed person anywhere on the issue.

The three of them, representing the panel, described the scope of the problem in the United States.

"We spent ... almost 2 1/2 hours with him," Burke said, "and discussed every aspect of the sex-abuse crisis in America: the cases pending, cases that would be coming, the obstructionist attitude of some of the bishops in the U.S. [keeping us from] getting information and proceeding."

In the months afterward, the Vatican announced an extensive review of U.S. seminaries, which the trio had discussed with him, Burke said. And Ratzinger urged American bishops to collaborate with neighboring bishops on procedures for dealing with sex abuse rather than working entirely on their own, a subject the American visitors had also discussed, Burke said.

At the meeting, "there was no indication that he would be the next pope," Burke said. "But my hope was, because he was in a position to actually effect change and bring something about, it gave us hope. And then when he did become pope I was ecstatic."

The Vatican says the recent criticism is undeserved. It says Vatican officials didn't learn of the Milwaukee abuse until decades after it started, because three different Milwaukee bishops failed to report it sooner. And Ratzinger's underling when he served in Munich in the 1970s says he reinstated the abusive priest without telling Ratzinger.

Burleigh, the former president of E.W Scripps Co., owner of a chain of American newspapers, said he is inclined to believe the Vatican explanation.

"I think he's getting a bum rap on a lot of things," he said of the pope. "I'm just not very quick to jump to the judgment that a lot of people want to seem to jump to at the moment. A lot of things, we don't know."

But Burke said she has wondered whether Ratzinger, decades ago, was as negligent as other bishops who in the past heeded advice from lawyers and psychologists that abusive priests could simply be reassigned. Bishops have since said they simply hadn't understood the nature of sex abuse. Since 2002, a zero-tolerance policy in place in U.S. dioceses has permanently barred from ministry any priest found to have molested a single minor.

"As time goes on," Burke said, "there is no reason for me to think he wouldn't have acted that way. Because that was the culture. They all did it."

She said she was more disturbed with the report that his Vatican office stopped canonical proceedings against the Wisconsin priest due to his illness and the age of the case.

"If your brother-in-law committed this crime," she said, "he'd be sent to jail in two seconds."

[Jeff Diamant writes for The Star-Ledger in Newark, N.J.]

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