NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Cardinal George: Next pope must embrace 'zero tolerance' for sex abuse

Francis X. Rocca Catholic News Service | Mar. 4, 2013
Conclave 2013
Vatican City

The next pope must be "very aware" of the need for vigilance in preventing clergy sex abuse and accept a policy of "zero tolerance" as the universal law of the church, said Chicago's Cardinal Francis George.

The cardinal, who will vote in the upcoming papal election, spoke to journalists Monday between sessions of the first day of pre-conclave meetings at the Vatican.

Asked if he would consider a candidate's approach to "sexual misconduct by clergy" when choosing the next pope, George said "that will be an important issue" because sex abuse is a "terrible wound on the body of the church."

"Whoever's elected pope," the cardinal said, "obviously has to accept the universal code of the church now, which is zero tolerance for anyone who has ever abused a minor child, (who) therefore may not remain in public ministry in the church. So that has to be accepted."

"I think that will not be a problem," he added. "There's a deep-seated conviction, certainly on the part of anyone who's a pastor in a diocese, that this has to be continually addressed."

The cardinal noted that U.S. bishops lobbied to make their own zero-tolerance policy part of the church's canon law and convinced bishops' conferences in other countries, such as India, to adopt similar norms.

Although the "incidence of abuse is practically zero right now as far as we can tell," the cardinal said, "there are still the victims. And the wound, therefore, is deep in their hearts and minds very often, and as long as it's with them it's with all of us, and that will last for a long time. So the next pope has to be very aware of this."

George, 76, also replied to a question about Scottish Cardinal Keith O'Brien, 74, who announced Feb. 25 that he would not participate in the upcoming conclave because he did not want media attention focused on him. The announcement followed reports that three priests and a former priest had accused him of "inappropriate conduct" with them going back to the 1980s.

On Sunday, O'Brien publicly asked forgiveness [1] for "times that my sexual conduct has fallen below the standards expected of me as a priest, archbishop and cardinal" and announced he would "play no further part in the public life of the Catholic Church in Scotland."

"It's a tragic moment for him, certainly," George said. "The tragic moment was when he was guilty of misconduct and then the consequence has played itself out now.

"I'm not sure that the personal tragedy of a particular cardinal will have much influence on the discussion"

among cardinals, he added, "but that remains to be seen."

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