

A Maine bishop uses the threat of excommunication to silence criticism.

Maine bishop threatens to punish vocal activist

By DAVID SHARP

PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — The leader of Maine's Roman Catholics has taken the unusual step of threatening to punish an outspoken advocate for people who were sexually abused by priests, possibly by denying him communion.

Paul Kendrick of Freeport has been banned from the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Portland, and warned in a letter that if he tries again to contact Portland Bishop Richard Malone he risks losing any right "to participate fully in the sacramental life of the church."

Kendrick, a co-founder of the Maine chapter of the lay reform group Voice of the Faithful, has been a vocal critic of how church leaders have responded to abuse claims and treated victims.

... Sue Bernard, a spokeswoman for the Diocese of Portland, said the bishop doesn't object to criticism but that Kendrick's actions have gone far beyond that. Kendrick has protested outside churches, inundated the diocese with mail and e-mail, participated in a public confrontation with Malone and even showed up at an out-of-state meeting the bishop attended, Bernard said. She called it a campaign of harassment that ultimately could undermine Malone's ministry.

... Kendrick got word of the potential penalty after he told the bishop in a letter that he planned to attend Christmas Eve Mass at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, where Malone often celebrates Mass. The activist then received a criminal trespass order that barred him from the cathedral, the chancery and Malone's residence. He was also served an order to cease and desist from harassing Malone.

The vicar general, the Rev. Andrew Dubois, further warned Kendrick in a letter of church-imposed penalties if he fails to abide by terms of a church order forbidding Kendrick from coming within 500 feet of the bishop or being in the same building when he's present.

Nicholas Cafardi, a canon lawyer and former dean of Duquesne Law School, said he had never heard of a bishop using church law, in this case the threat of an "interdict," against activists.

... The Rev. Tom Doyle, a Virginia priest and advocate for victims who is representing Kendrick, said the church has threatened to prevent Kendrick from receiving Holy Communion if he doesn't comply.

Doyle said he can't find any basis for the diocese's actions, but he said church leaders have been angered by the aggressive tactics of some activists. Doyle said his work with abuse victims cost him a promising career as a canon lawyer in the church.

"One of the biggest sins in the Catholic Church is to criticize a bishop," Doyle said.

The following is an excerpt from an interview with Father Richard McBrien.

A talk with The Rev. Richard P. McBrien: Life as a theologian, commentator - and lightning rod

By Michael Paulson

CATHOLICISM IN AMERICA is riven by internal debates - often about gender, sexuality, and authority - and seemingly unending controversies, about politics and parish closings and the handling of sexual abuse.

... A priest of the Hartford archdiocese, McBrien taught for a decade at Boston College before moving to Notre Dame in 1980. He has just come out with his 25th book, a history of Catholic ecclesiology called, simply, *The Church*, and spoke with Ideas during a visit to Boston.

IDEAS: How would you describe your standing in the church now?

McBRIEN: Well, I'm a theologian and a priest in good standing. What more could I say? I've been around a long time, and I'm not easily disposed of, put it that way, even though some people would like to have had that done.

IDEAS: Your column is not running in some places that it used to run.

McBRIEN: As the Catholic hierarchy became more conservative under Pope John Paul II, bishops who were open to a diversity of viewpoints in the church either died or retired, and were replaced, in almost every case, by bishops who were more, let's say, attuned to the desires and intentions of the Holy See. I used to kid, I'd say bishops get points if they drop my column. They get noticed, and then they get promoted eventually, and so forth. I can give you so many examples. I mean, let's take Boston. Cushing was a patron of mine. He liked me, and I liked him. He had his foibles, but we all do. I liked Cardinal Cushing very much. But Medeiros was in, and Medeiros once said to me, 'Richard, what would my mother think if she read your column?' and I said, 'Your eminence, I don't write my column for your mother.' So then it got dropped.

IDEAS: Have you become more liberal or more outspoken over the years?

McBRIEN: No, I don't think so. I don't think of myself in those terms, although it's a relative term. I mean obviously I'm liberal if you define liberal stands as being open to the ordination of women, feeling that abortion shouldn't be a litmus test defining whether one is a good Catholic or not. I'm very much against the policy of a certain handful of bishops to threaten to deny Communion to Catholic Democrats - and they're always Democrats. I think that's counterproductive, and I think it's a mistake, and I also think it's contrary to the policy of the bishops conference.

IDEAS: Why are you such a lightning rod? Whenever I quote you, I get e-mails, and I see bloggers taking after you.

McBRIEN: That's a good question. It might be because I have such a public image. I regard myself as a broad centrist. But to an extreme right-wing person, especially in religion, and within the Catholic Church, a centrist or a center/left person is automatically perceived as an extreme left-wing person, bordering on, if not actually in, heresy. But for every e-mail or blog that you would see that would condemn me . . . I can tell you I got a lot of e-mails and letters from Catholics who said that I had given them hope and that their teenage kids who had been alienated from the church said that, "If there were more priests like the guy we were watching on television, I'd still be a Catholic."

IDEAS: And why don't you leave?

McBRIEN: Because it's my church. It's my home. And I was born in it. I've been a Catholic all my life. And I have affirmation from so many good people. I feel that I have a responsibility to them to continue working at it and doing the best I can.

IDEAS: You're so critical of the bishops, but you don't seem angry.

McBRIEN: I'm critical of the bishops not because I have any gripe against any one of them personally. John Paul II ... did some good things. [But] the most serious deficiency the late pope had ... was the poor quality of men he put in the hierarchy. And nowhere was this more obvious than at the height of the sexual abuse scandal in the priesthood. The truth be told, a significant number of bishops ... including some high-ranking bishops at the time, were gay. I have no problem with people being gay, but the Catholic Church officially does, and it's constantly making statements that are hostile to gays, and they were compromised. They could not exercise leadership because they could not speak comfortably about issues relating to sexuality, because they were conflicted themselves.

IDEAS: Why don't you wear a collar?

McBRIEN: I only wear a collar when I go to my home parish in West Hartford to say Mass on a Sunday when I'm home. My Roman collar is my television uniform. You don't see the apostles with Roman collars on. It's a custom. And the custom in the academic world is that most priests who teach in Catholic colleges and universities wear a tie or just have an open sport shirt.

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The following op-ed piece, by Charles M. Blow, appeared in the New York Times on December 27th.

Heaven for the Godless?

In June, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life published a controversial survey in which 70 percent of Americans said that they believed religions other than theirs could lead to eternal life.

This threw evangelicals into a tizzy. After all, the Bible makes it clear that heaven is a velvet-roped V.I.P. area reserved for Christians. Jesus said so: "I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." But the survey suggested that Americans just weren't buying that.

The evangelicals complained that people must not have understood the question. The respondents couldn't actually believe what they were saying, could they?

So in August, Pew asked the question again. (They released the results last week.) Sixty-five percent of respondents said — again — that other religions could lead to eternal life. But this time, to clear up any confusion, Pew asked them to specify which religions. The respondents essentially said all of them.

And they didn't stop there. Nearly half also thought that atheists could go to heaven — dragged there kicking and screaming, no doubt — and most thought that people with no religious faith also could go.

What on earth does this mean?

One very plausible explanation is that Americans just want good things to come to good people, regardless of their faith. As Alan Segal, a professor of religion at Barnard College told me: "We are a multicultural society, and people expect this American life to continue the same way in heaven." He explained that in our society, we meet so many good people of different faiths that it's hard for us to imagine God letting them go to hell. In fact, in the most recent survey, Pew asked people what they thought determined whether a person would achieve eternal life. Nearly as many Christians said you could achieve eternal life by just being a good person as said that you had to believe in Jesus.

Also, many Christians apparently view their didactic text as flexible. According to Pew's August survey, only 39 percent of Christians believe that the Bible is the literal word of God, and 18 percent think that it's just a book written by men and not the word of God at all. In fact, on the question in the Pew survey about what it would take to achieve eternal life, only 1 percent of Christians said living life in accordance with the Bible. Now, there remains the possibility that some of those polled may not have understood the implications of their answers. As John Green, a senior fellow at the Pew Forum, said, "The capacity of ignorance to influence survey outcomes should never be underestimated." But I don't think that they are ignorant about this most basic tenet of their faith. I think that they are choosing to ignore it ... for goodness sake.

The Pope suggests that dialogue may resolve world tensions.

By RACHEL DONADIO – New York Times
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ROME — Pope Benedict XVI called for peace in the Middle East, Darfur and Zimbabwe and stability in other war-torn lands in a particularly politically pointed Christmas greeting to the city and the world.

... The pope blessed the efforts of "all those who, rather than resigning themselves to the twisted logic of conflict and violence, prefer instead the path of dialogue and negotiation as the means of resolving tensions within each country and finding just and lasting solutions to the conflicts troubling the region."

The Pope speaking at Midnight mass:

"The medieval theologian William of Saint Thierry once said that God – from the time of Adam – saw that his grandeur provoked resistance in man, that we felt limited in our own being and threatened in our freedom. Therefore God chose a new way. He became a child. He made himself dependent and weak, in need of our love. Now – this God who has become a child says to us – you can no longer fear me, you can only love me."