

Catholic priest, the Rev. Bob Begin, challenges Bishop Richard Lennon on church closings

By Michael O'Malley, *The Plain Dealer*
March 12, 2010

The Rev. Bob Begin, pastor of St. Colman on Cleveland's West Side, told the bishop in a letter Friday that the ongoing closings of churches in the Cleveland Catholic Diocese are violating the rights of parishioners and may be turning people away from salvation.

Begin, 71, who has a long history of challenging the church over perceived injustices, sent a copy of the letter to *The Plain Dealer*, saying he has written similar letters privately to the bishop, but has not received responses.

"By this public letter," Begin wrote to Lennon, "I wish to make it clear to the people of our diocese that my own public silence on this matter and that of many other priests is not a silence that has agreed with your decisions.

"It is a silence that was motivated sometimes by a fear of your retaliation, sometimes by an unwillingness to hurt the faith and culture of the church we love and/or by a sense that speaking up would not do any good."

Diocese spokesman Robert Tayek said Friday that he read a copy of the letter, sent electronically to him by Begin. However, Tayek said the bishop had not seen it. "Father Begin's opinion is just that, one man's opinion," said Tayek. "We are not about to engage in a public debate between the bishop and one of his priests. The bishop's door is always open to his priests."

Begin's four-page letter comes one year after Lennon announced the closings of 52 churches in the eight-county diocese, saying the downsizing is due to shortages of priests, collection-basket cash and congregates. The bishop later reversed himself and allowed St. Colman and St. Ignatius of Antioch to remain open.

So far, about 30 churches have been shuttered. St. Rose in Cleveland is closing Sunday and will merge with Saints Cyril and Methodius in Lakewood.

"The amalgam of what has happened has really been harmful to the salvation of souls," Begin said in an interview Friday. "It's driving people away from God. And if I don't say something, that would be harmful to the salvation of my soul."

Begin called on the bishop to have mediations with angry parishioner groups like Endangered Catholics and Code Purple, which are fighting the closings through protests, vigils and appeals to the Vatican in Rome. Supporters of the now-closed St. Casimir on Cleveland's East Side hold weekly vigils outside the church.

Begin also criticized Lennon for closing a number of churches against the recommendations of cluster committees, which are grassroots groups the diocese convened for advice on the closings.

"The least the bishop could do is to mediate with the people," Begin said in the interview. "He has to do that because he's violating their rights. The first right is the right to exist.

"He has to explain what his compelling reasons are for closing some of these churches. That has not happened. So it appears to be arbitrary." Begin, whose church was eventually spared by a grassroots effort after Lennon ordered it closed, said he doesn't expect any retaliation from the bishop over his letter.

He said a number of priests are quietly grumbling, especially those in inner city neighborhoods where most of the closed churches are located.

"A lot is being said privately," he said. "Morale is horrible and there's a lot of anger." He said one reason priests aren't speaking out is because "a lot of them fear public controversy hurts the church. But the church is hurting enough right now, so it's time to do something."

Tayek disagreed that morale among priests is low.

"I don't believe Father Begin was present when the bishop met just recently with more than 230 priests of the diocese," he said. "Father Begin's observations would be best described as purely speculative."

From the Associated Press.

Child Abuse Scandal Reaches Catholic Church, Pope

March 13, 2010

It often starts as a voice in the wilderness, but can swell into an entire nation's demand for truth. From Ireland to Germany, Europe's many victims of child abuse in the Roman Catholic church are finally breaking social taboos and confronting the clergy to face its demons.

Ireland was the first in Europe to confront the church's worldwide custom of shielding pedophile priests from the law and public scandal. Now that legacy of suppressed childhood horror is being confronted in other parts of the Continent — nowhere more poignantly than in Germany, the homeland of Pope Benedict XVI.

The recent spread of claims into the Netherlands, Austria and Italy has analysts and churchmen wondering how deep the scandal runs, which nation will be touched next, and whether a tide of lawsuits will force European dioceses to declare bankruptcy like join their American cousins.

"You have to presume that the cover-up of abuse exists everywhere, to one extent or another. A new case could appear in a new country tomorrow," said David Quinn, director of a Christian think tank, the Iona Institute, that seeks to promote family values in an Ireland increasingly cool to Catholicism.

Quinn noted that stories of systemic physical, sexual and emotional abuse circulated privately in Irish society for decades, but only moved aboveground in the mid-1990s when former altar boy Andrew Madden and orphanage survivor Christine Buckley went public with lawsuits and exposes of how priests and nuns tormented them with impunity.

Floodgates opened for Irish complaints that have topped 15,000 in this country of 4 million. Three government-ordered investigations have shocked and disgusted the nation, which has footed most of the bill to settle legal claims topping euro1 billion (nearly \$1.5 billion).

"A lot comes down to: When does that first victim gather the courage to come forward into the spotlight?" Quinn said. "It seems to take that trigger event, the lone voice who says what so many kept silent so long. That's basically happening now in Germany. It could happen next in Spain, Poland, anywhere."

In January, an elite Jesuit school in Berlin declared it was aware of seven child-abuse cases in its past and appointed an outside investigator, Ursula Raue, to seek testimony. Within weeks, she had gathered stories of long-suppressed woe from more than 100 ex-students abused by their Jesuit masters, and from 60 molested by parish priests.

"I always thought that at some point the wave would reach us," said Petra Dorsch-Jungsberger, a commentator on Catholic affairs and retired University of Munich communications professor.

She credited heavy German media coverage of the latest Irish abuse scandal — a November report into decades of cover-up in the Dublin Archdiocese involving approximately 170 priests — with inspiring similar soul-searching in Germany. "Once the door had been opened, then many others felt they were able to step up and say: That happened to us too," she said.

In recent weeks, new German abuse claims have surfaced on a near-daily basis and spread to Pope Benedict's Bavarian heartland and the Regensburg boys' choir long directed by the pope's brother. Benedict was Archbishop Joseph Ratzinger of Munich from 1977 to 1982, and questions now focus on what role, if any, the pontiff, played in handing pedophile priests to new parishes rather than to the law.

The Vatican on Saturday denounced what it called aggressive attempts to drag Pope Benedict XVI into the spreading scandals of pedophile priests in his German homeland, and contended he has long confronted abuse cases with courage. In separate interviews, both the Holy See's spokesman and its prosecutor for sex abuse of minors by clergy sought to defend the pope.

"It's rather clear that in the last days, there have been those who have tried, with a certain aggressive persistence, in Regensburg and Munich, to look for elements to personally involve the Holy Father in the matter of abuses," Vatican spokesman the Rev. Federico Lombardi told Vatican Radio.

It's inevitable that all bishops of the day, including Ratzinger, handled abuse complaints against priests in-house, said the Rev. Fergus O'Donoghue, editor of the Irish Jesuit journal *Studies*.

"The pope was no different to any other bishop at time. The church policy was to keep it all quiet — to help people, but to avoid scandal. Avoiding scandal was a huge issue for the church," he said. "Of course there was cover-up," he added. But worse was "the systematic lack of concern for the victims."

In the Netherlands, a former Catholic boarding-school abuse victim is leading a campaign for accountability. Bert Smeets, 58, has formed *Mea Culpa*, a victims group that has collected testimony from hundreds of abuse victims and is mulling a class-action lawsuit against the Dutch church.

The church has apologized to the victims and set up an inquiry headed by a former government minister, a Protestant. Smeets dismisses that effort as "a typical Vatican cover-up." He said the pressure on the church came from aggressive investigations into abuse in Ireland and the U.S.

In other predominantly Catholic areas of Europe, child-abuse scandals have tarnished individual priests and even a Polish archbishop, but have not mushroomed into a mass movement. In Spain, more than a dozen priests have been convicted of child abuse in recent decades and two potentially larger-scale cases are attracting attention.

Ireland was until relatively recently the most enthusiastically Catholic country in Europe. Its half-dozen seminaries exported priests worldwide. All but one of those seminaries is closed now, illustrating the rapid falloff in Mass attendance as the economy has advanced and secularism has spread.

Quinn, the Dublin think-tank director, noted that a few Irish dioceses are openly warning that they're struggling to pay bills stemming from abuse claims. In the southeast diocese of Kells, the archbishop's house has had to be remortgaged. "The church is asset-rich but cash-poor," Quinn said, noting that it's the biggest property owner in Ireland but has comparatively little cash in the bank. He said the Vatican, too, has less money on tap than resides in the endowment fund of a typical top-tier U.S. university.

Associated Press Writers Melissa Eddy in Berlin, Ciaran Giles in Madrid, Nicole Winfield in Rome, Monika Scislowska in Warsaw and Mike Corder in The Hague, Netherlands, contributed to this report.

Send your comments and articles to tony@tonyercolano.com