

Archbishop's book details lifelong journey, struggle with sexuality

ST. FRANCIS, Wis. – In his new book, “A Pilgrim in a Pilgrim Church: Memoirs of a Catholic Archbishop,” retired Archbishop Rembert G. Weakland of Milwaukee details aspects of his life from birth to retirement.

In the prologue the 82-year-old archbishop explains why he wrote the 384-page book, set to be released by Eerdmans Publishing May 29: “I am internally propelled to share with those I love and served for so many years a fuller story than I was able to tell in May 2002 when I apologized publicly to them.”

That 2002 apology followed revelations that Archbishop Weakland had paid \$450,000 in archdiocesan funds to Paul Marcoux, a man with whom he had a sexual relationship in 1979.

In a statement on its Web site, the Milwaukee Archdiocese said the book “will undoubtedly spark a variety of emotions in Catholics throughout southeastern Wisconsin. Some people will be angry about the book, others will support it.”

“The Archdiocese of Milwaukee continues to pray for the needs and intentions of all those who experienced this difficult time,” the statement added.

Archbishop Weakland said the decision to write his memoirs was primarily “rooted in a religious motivation.”

“It is embedded in my concept of the church’s nature and as a communion of believers on a faith journey, a communion of saints (few in number) and of sinners (most of us),” he said in the prologue. “My story affects everyone else’s story and thus, at least in part, belongs to them.”

In the epilogue, he returns to why he has written his memoirs, adding that he “often had a front seat” in the church and world history that parallels his life.

Noting concern about “revisionism” that he detected particularly when people were

writing about the years of Pope Paul VI's pontificate, the archbishop wrote, "I have thought it important to say how I, as one individual, saw what was happening then. True, it is only one believer's experience, but, I hope, one worth sharing and saving for posterity."

The story wends from his childhood and Benedictine vocation in western Pennsylvania to his rise to the leadership of the Benedictines. At age 36, he was elected archabbot for life of St. Vincent Archabbey in Latrobe, Pa. While he was ascending in the community, the Second Vatican Council was under way.

He recalls his enthusiasm for Pope John XXIII's opening talk and writes, "Can anyone fault those of us who expected the council to usher in a new era for the church as it looked at its heritage, tried to renew and update itself, and then contribute to a better world?"

Archbishop Weakland adds that during the council he changed his "image of God from that of enforcing policeman to one of a loving and caring parent."

In 1967, the Benedictines, while meeting in Rome, elected him the fifth abbot primate - head of the Benedictine order. In that role he visited Benedictine communities throughout the world and would regularly meet with Pope Paul VI, whom he describes as having "a monastic soul and sensitivity."

But it was also during his time as abbot primate that Archbishop Weakland began to experience his sexual awakening and orientation, at age 45, and consider the ramifications of a celibate life.

"I never doubted my vocation or the significance of the vows I took; but now I had to see them in a new light, namely, not as the avoidance of sin and evil, but as a new way of living the Gospel of love that Jesus Christ preached. I wanted to be a person who lived by love not fear," he writes.

In 1977 he struggled with Pope Paul's personal request that he become archbishop of Milwaukee. "I never wanted to be a bishop, otherwise I would never have become a Benedictine," he writes. Yet "how could I refuse the personal wish of the pope and still be at peace with myself?"

His relationship with the Vatican during the papacy of Pope John Paul II was not easy.

“On every ad limina trip without exception, I noticed that I would be singled out – the other bishops were never aware of this – and told to meet with” the heads of various Vatican offices, Archbishop Weakland writes. “Upon arrival in their offices, I would be presented with a list of complaints. These were actions or decisions of mine that seemed to irritate the pope and members of the Curia.”

Four years into his episcopacy, Archbishop Weakland was asked to chair the U.S. bishops’ committee responsible for drafting the pastoral letter “Economic Justice for All.” He terms the experience “one of the most important and formative periods of my life.”

During the bishops’ spring meeting at Collegeville, Minn., in 1988, Archbishop Weakland learned that the Vatican Congregation for Bishops had asked another U.S. archbishop to investigate him. He writes that no one from the Vatican spoke to him about the outcome of that investigation during his ad limina visit in December 1988.

“Through it all, I retained a deep respect for the Holy Father as pope, but found little to love and admire in his style of treating people who disagreed with him,” Archbishop Weakland writes. “I was convinced that he was indeed a very holy man, but not one without flaws.”

Archbishop Weakland’s prologue focuses on his 2002 apology “for the scandal that has occurred because of my sinfulness” and an explanation of his relationship with Marcoux, the \$450,000 financial settlement paid to him in 1997 with archdiocesan funds, and the relationship and settlement being made public by Marcoux in 2002.

With money he earned from speaking and writing, and through funds raised by several of his friends, Archbishop Weakland repaid the \$450,000 to the archdiocese. In a recent interview with The Associated Press, the archbishop said proceeds from the sale of his memoirs will be donated to the Milwaukee-based Catholic Community Foundation.