

At Vatican, frustration and some optimism over abuse scandal

VATICAN CITY - Fresh developments in the continuing storm over clerical sex abuse illustrate a chronic Vatican problem as well as some reasons for guarded optimism about the future.

The problem, acknowledged by many inside the Roman Curia, has been recent missteps in communication that have undercut the Vatican's own patient efforts to provide accurate and detailed information about sex abuse policies.

The latest came when Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican secretary of state, told reporters in Chile April 12 that many psychologists believe there is a connection between homosexuality and pedophilia.

The groans could be heard throughout Vatican City the next day, as news media reported not only the cardinal's remarks but also the intensely critical public reaction - including a condemnation from the French government.

The Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, came back with a statement that tried to reframe Cardinal Bertone's remarks with an unusual disclaimer: "Church authorities do not believe they are competent to make general affirmations about specifically psychological or medical issues."

The Vatican relies on specialists and experts for such information, Father Lombardi said. In fact, experts consulted by the Vatican several years ago argued against a cause-effect relationship between homosexuality and pedophilia.

The groans in Rome came from people who wondered why Cardinal Bertone was

needlessly raising an inflammatory side issue at a time when the Vatican was already under a media siege on sex abuse.

The Vatican has been down this road before. A papal preacher recently surprised the pope and others at a Good Friday liturgy by comparing criticism of the church on the sex abuse issue with anti-Semitism. A cardinal stood up at the pope's Easter Mass and used the term "petty gossip" to describe such criticism.

Some have faulted Pope Benedict XVI for failing to take firmer control of the reins.

"It's a matter of governance. You have to bring people together, get them on the same page. And tell them to stop speculating out loud with the media," said one Vatican source. But this kind of hands-on management is not Pope Benedict's strength, he added.

Father Lombardi had to put out another fire April 15, after a French Web site published a 2001 letter from Cardinal Dario Castrillon Hoyos, at the time head of the Vatican's Congregation for Clergy, congratulating a French bishop for not reporting a sexually abusive priest to the police. The priest was later sentenced to 18 years in prison for multiple counts of sexual assault. The bishop was given a three-month suspended sentence for not reporting the abuse in violation of French law.

"I congratulate you for not denouncing a priest to the civil administration," Cardinal Castrillon wrote to Bishop Pierre Pican of Bayeux-Lisieux. "You have acted well and I am happy to have a colleague in the episcopate who, in the eyes of history and of all other bishops in the world, preferred prison to denouncing his son, a priest."

Father Lombardi said in a statement: "This letter is a confirmation of how opportune it was to centralize the handling of cases of sex abuse of minors by clergy under the competence of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in order to assure their rigorous and coherent management."

In effect, Father Lombardi was pointing to Cardinal Castrillon as part of a problem that has since been overcome. Cardinal Castrillon retired in 2006; Bishop Pican retired last March.

The Vatican has emphasized recently that it now tells bishops to follow civil law when it comes to reporting accusations of sexual abuse to civil authorities. When that policy was posted online as part of a “layman’s guide” to the Vatican’s sex abuse procedures, it prompted such erroneous headlines as “Vatican: Bishops Must Report Alleged Abuse To Police.”

Erroneous, because where civil law does not require mandatory reporting – in Italy, for example – the Vatican still advises bishops not to do so. The reasoning is twofold, Vatican sources said: first, the role of a bishop in these situations is to effectively implement church law, not to act as a reporting agent for the state. Second, while bishops should advise and sometimes encourage victims to go to police, they should not exercise that right for them; some victims, for a variety of reasons, may not want to report an allegation to police.

The Vatican’s policy, then, still has the potential to create problematic situations – especially because non-reporting, in the eyes of many people today, is the equivalent of cover-up.

For all the complaining about Vatican communications, there is a growing consensus inside the Roman Curia that, this time around, the Vatican has been more effective and proactive in responding to allegations, rumors and misinterpretations on the sex abuse issue.

Officials of the Vatican’s doctrinal congregation have given extensive and detailed interviews, the Vatican has translated and posted on its Web site copious background information and documents on church law and sex abuse, and Father

Lombardi has been unusually swift to respond to media reports.

Reporters on the Vatican's e-mail list sometimes receive such statements late at night, reflecting an urgency that in previous times would have been reserved for papal death.

Another point the Vatican is eager to make in the court of public opinion is that the recent disclosures and media reports have focused on cases that are decades old, whereas new allegations of sexual abuse against priests are relatively rare.

Father Lombardi, for example, cited a study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which said more than 60,000 child sex abuse perpetrators were reported in 2008. In contrast, in the one-year period covered by the 2008-2009 audit of child sex abuse in U.S. church institutions, there were 21 new accusations of sex abuse by priests against persons who are currently minors.

In short, the Vatican now has a record of progress to point to, largely thanks to the efforts in the United States. Eight years ago, the struggle to establish strict sex abuse norms in U.S. dioceses met with resistance in some Vatican quarters - notably from Cardinal Castrillon, who has since retired. Today, many at the Vatican are pointing to the U.S. norms as a success story.