



John Kass

## Church in no position to be casting stones

If a man criticizes his church for withholding evidence in a sexual abuse case involving a priest and two minor girls—and says parishioners should stop donating until church leaders comply with a court order—is he a sinner?

Should his priest pressure him to recant and, when he refuses, should he be publicly castigated from the pulpit, accused of breaking the 10 Commandments by bearing false witness?

That's where Frank Bochte of Geneva found himself in late November—publicly called out as a sinner in church.

"I'm sitting there in church thinking this is like 'Alice in Wonderland,'" said Bochte, a lawyer, law-enforcement official and lifelong Roman Catholic who belongs to St. Peter Roman Catholic Church in Geneva.

He had written a letter published Nov. 16 in the Daily Herald. He wrote it in response to a parish newsletter from Rev. Joseph Jarmoluk that said St. Peter faced a budget crisis because of the soft economy.

Bochte was angered that no mention was made about how the sexual abuse scandal involving former priest Mark Campobello has hurt contributions.

So Bochte wrote to the newspaper, ask-

ing that parishioners not contribute until the diocese gives prosecutors its notes from an internal investigation of Campobello.

Despite repeated attempts to reach him in the last week, Jarmoluk did not return phone calls. The Rockford Diocese, through a spokesman, said it was not aware of the spat.

Yet several parishioners we interviewed confirmed that the priest, in his homily, was critical of an unnamed letter writer.

"All of a sudden, I'm being made out to be the sinner, I'm the bad guy, I'm the demon and parishioners are listening," Bochte said. "I'm sure people walked out of there, thinking, 'My God—this person that wrote the letter must be the worst person in the world.'"

Though Bochte works in law enforcement, he is not involved in the investigation. But he is a Catholic, and the secrecy bothers him.

The criminal case involves Campobello, a former St. Peter priest charged in 2002 by Kane County prosecutors with the sexual abuse of a 14-year-old parish girl. Then another girl who had been a student at Aurora Central Catholic High School alleged Campobello abused her when she was 15 and he was an assistant principal there. He was charged in both cases.

Campobello has pleaded not guilty. His criminal case comes up Thursday for a status hearing.

Even before the first criminal charge was filed, the Rockford Diocese began privately interviewing witnesses. Kane County Circuit Judge Timothy Sheldon ordered the diocese to turn over its investigation records.

The diocese refused. The matter is now before the Illinois Appellate Court, with the diocese arguing that it is protected by the 1st Amendment.

I don't think that the 1st Amendment was written to shelter alleged child molesters. And I know that sexual abuse by clergy is not exclusively a Catholic prob-

lem.

When it comes to child abuse, regardless of denomination or faith, secrecy cannot be tolerated.

Bochte said the only way to get the church's attention is to stop giving.

"Refusing to financially support a diocese that seems to value the reputation of an alleged sexual abuser over his victim appears to be the only way," Bochte wrote the Daily Herald.

"The diocese's position . . . is morally bankrupt and not in any way reflective of what I have come to expect from the Catholic Church."

After the letter was published, Bochte said, the priest called a private meeting and told him he had harmed parish programs and borne false witness.

Bochte said he was asked to recant, but he refused. Two weeks later came the critical homily, Bochte and others said.

"For a priest to get up in the altar, that's kind of unfair," one parishioner said.

"He's got a captive audience—Frank just has the people who read the newspaper."

Barbara Blaine, president of Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, said the defensive posture is typical.

"The diocese continues to play legal hardball while they profess to be committed to openness and transparency," she said. "All of their actions speak to secrecy, silence and continuing cover-up."

Bochte knows that telling me his story could cause him further problems at church. But he feels it is his duty to press church leaders on such a serious matter.

"If I'm called a sinner by publicly discussing how this diocese handles sex abuse allegations, I'll wear that badge proudly," he said, "because no Catholic should feel intimidated."

Last week, a national audit commissioned by the Catholic Church evaluated how all dioceses in the U.S. implemented reforms to deal with sex abuse cases.

Rockford got a passing grade.

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