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Keating recalls service on review board

Joe Feuerherd | Aug. 14, 2009

Former Oklahoma Gov. Frank Keating (UPI/Michael Kleinfeld)

WASHINGTON -- When Frank Keating, then the Republican governor of Oklahoma, agreed in 2002 to serve as the first chair of the board established by the U.S. bishops to investigate clergy sex abuse, he was admittedly naive. ?I couldn?t imagine that something like this could happen,? Keating told 200-plus attendees of the 21st annual gathering of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP) on Aug. 8.

Initially, said Keating, he believed that accusations that bishops and other church leaders coddled molesters and covered up their actions were largely untrue, the result of ?an anti-Catholic bias.? But as he began to understand the scope of the crisis, said the blunt-spoken former high-ranking FBI official and federal prosecutor, he concluded that there was only one adequate response. Those guilty of ?criminal conduct should be locked up,? he said. ?Criminals are criminals -- take them out and jail them.?

Further, said Keating, bishops and other church officials who covered up for clergy molesters were also culpable. ?What these people did is criminal ... and if I aid and abet I am equally a participant in that crime,? he said.

That law enforcement approach, said Keating, did not endear him to the bishops who had asked him to lead the National Review Board. In his yearlong tenure heading the panel, said Keating, he was subjected to backbiting and vicious innuendo that he did not expect from leaders of the church. Among the incidents was an accusation from a church official in Keating?s home state of Oklahoma that Keating ?never goes to Mass and actually keeps a mistress.? Both charges were untrue, Keating said, though he never received an apology.

Likewise, he said, when he suggested that Catholics unsatisfied with a particular bishop?s response to clergy molesters should ?vote with their feet? and withhold their contributions, the Boston archdiocesan newspaper accused him of ?encouraging Catholics to commit a mortal sin.? In fact, said Keating, he was urging Catholics to attend Mass elsewhere and direct their contributions to other Catholic institutions.

The final straw in Keating?s rocky one-year tenure came when he told the press that that some bishops were trying to quash the board?s inquiry by using tactics more suited to an organized crime entity than a church. ?My remarks, which some bishops found offensive, were deadly accurate,? wrote Keating in his resignation letter. He

continued, ?I make no apology. To resist grand jury subpoenas, to suppress the names of offending clerics, to deny, to obfuscate, to explain away; that is the model of a criminal organization, not my church.?

He stood by his comments at the SNAP meeting. Bishops who ?hire a lawyer to seek to quash a subpoena indicates to me that [they have] a lot to hide,? he said.

Keating, now president of a Washington lobbying group representing life insurance companies, acknowledged that since his departure from the board he has not followed details related to the abuse crisis. Still, he said, the current review board consists of ?not particularly high-profile high-velocity people,? some of whom are employed by the church. It would be preferable, he said, if the board consisted of ?people who don?t need the bishop.?

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