

## Bishop: Total re-examination of Catholic faith, culture needed

Joshua J. McElwee | Mar. 28, 2012



Retired Australian Bishop Geoffrey Robinson speaks Wednesday at Chicago's Newberry Library. (NCR photo/Joshua J. McElwee)

**CHICAGO** -- The roots of the decades-long clergy sex abuse scandal lie not in any set of rules or practices, but are found deep in the culture of the church itself, retired Australian Bishop Geoffrey Robinson said Wednesday in a wide-ranging talk at the historic Newberry Library in downtown Chicago.

The "major fault" of the church in the scandal, Robinson said, is that it "refuses to look at any teaching, law, practice or even attitude of the church itself as in any way contributing" to the crisis.

"In studying abuse, we must be free to follow the argument wherever it leads rather than impose in advance the limitation that our study must not demand change in any teaching or law," he continued. "We must admit that there might be elements of the 'Catholic culture' that have contributed either to the abuse or to the poor response to abuse."

Peppering his talk with personal stories of bishops and priests, Robinson spoke of 12 areas of Catholic culture he said deserved "serious consideration" for their role in contributing to the abuse crisis, including our understanding of God as a being who is frequently angry and a hierarchy that is prone to a "culture of obsessive secrecy."

Speaking in a brief interview with *NCR* following the talk, Robinson said if the church wanted to convince people it was "finally serious" in its efforts to confront abuse, it might have to call a council specifically to deal with the crisis.

Wednesday's talk, hosted by Richard Sipe, Dominican Fr. Tom Doyle, Illinois Supreme Court Justice Anne Burke and other prominent area Catholics, is part of a speaking tour Robinson is making across the country this month. About 150 archdiocesan priests, former city aldermen and other city and state officials gathered for the talk.

Robinson, who served as auxiliary bishop of Sydney from 1984 until his retirement in 2004, has been a source of controversy in the church since at least 2002, when he called for Pope John Paul II to commission a church-wide study of clerical sexual abuse of minors in the church.

Robinson began the talk by mentioning his experience from 1994 to 2003 in chairing an Australian bishops' committee tasked with producing a response to the sexual abuse crisis in his country. He said his time in that role was a "very profound personal experience."

"At the end of it," he said, "I'd come to a profound sense of disillusionment with the whole response of the church, particularly at its highest levels."

Among the other aspects of Catholic culture Robinson said contributed to the abuse crisis are mandatory celibacy for priests, a "mystique" some attach to the priests as being "above other human beings," and a "creeping infallibility" of papal decrees, which is used to protect "all teachings ... in which a significant amount of papal energy and prestige have been invested."

The application of the church's teaching on infallibility is a "major force in preventing a pope from making admissions that there have been serious failures in the handling of abuse," Robinson said.

Mentioned in particular was Pope John Paul II, who Robinson stated "it must be said ... responded poorly" to the sex abuse crisis.

"With authority goes responsibility," Robinson said. "Pope John Paul many times claimed the authority, and he must accept the responsibility. The most basic task of a pope is surely to be the 'rock' that holds the church together, and by his silence in the most serious moral crisis facing the church in our times, the pope failed in this basic task."

Referencing the Second Vatican Council's recognition of the "sense of the faithful" and its definition of the church as the "People of God," Robinson said that "it is surely simple fact that the People of God as a whole would never have got us into the mess we are in, for their *sensus fidei* would have insisted on a far more rigorous and, dare I say it, Christian response."

"The pope and the bishops have lost credibility, and it is only the People of God who can restore it to them," he said. "If the church is to move forward, these painful lessons must be learned, for this is an issue on which to leave out the People of God has been positively suicidal."

He said there is still "a long way to go" before the church can "fully understand" all the causes of the abuse crisis, and if the church were at least to make a "concerted attack" on the factors he mentioned, it "would at long last be seen to be truly confronting abuse."

In Baltimore March 16, [the bishop called for "a new study of everything to do with sexuality"](#) [1] at the Seventh National Symposium on Catholicism and Homosexuality.

In that talk, Robinson called for a substantive rethinking of church teaching on sexuality, saying that while its emphasis on the profound significance of sex is correct, its natural law approach to sexual morality and its interpretation of ancient scriptural passages on homosexual and other sexual activity are in need of correction.

In Baltimore, Robinson also focused on the issue of our perception of God as a being who is angry; saying Catholic sexual teachings have "fostered a belief in an incredibly angry God" who "would condemn a person to an eternity in hell for a single unrepented moment of deliberate pleasure arising from sexual desire."

Wednesday, Robinson expanded on that notion of God, relating it to the sexual abuse crisis by saying it "can lead to the unhealthy attitude of sexuality being seen as dark, secretive and troublesome."

In the sexual abuse crisis, that attitude, Robinson said, helps to "place the emphasis on the sexual sin against God rather than the offense against the abused minor."

"Paedophilia was, therefore, to be dealt with in exactly the same manner as any other sexual sin: confession, total forgiveness and restoration to one's former state, and this was a significant part of the motivation for the practice of moving priests around from one parish to another," he said.

Robinson's 2007 book, *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus*, drew ire from his fellow bishops in Australia, who objected to his 2008 lecture tour in the United States to speak on some of the issues addressed in his book.

During that tour, it became public that Cardinal Roger Mahony, then archbishop of Los Angeles, had denied Robinson permission to speak in that archdiocese. In what seems to be a similar move, a letter Monday from Detroit Archbishop Allen Vigneron to the priests of the Detroit archdiocese asked they not attend Robinson's talk Tuesday.

"I would discourage your attendance at this presentation and ask that you share my concerns with anyone you know who is planning or considering to attend," writes Vigneron in the letter, which was obtained by *NCR*.

Speaking briefly after the bishop's talk, Burke, the Illinois Supreme Court justice, said she was "very pleased" with the event, especially with the number of priests from the Chicago archdiocese who attended. Several priests, Burke said, came but did not wear their clerical collars.

After Robinson's talk, remarks were also given by Dominican Sr. Barbara Reid, a vice president at the Catholic Theological Union, and Bryan Cones, the managing editor of *U.S. Catholic* magazine.

In her remarks, Reid, who is a New Testament scholar, thanked Robinson for his work confronting the notion of God as a being who is angry, saying it "has such damaging effects" on the faithful.

Ending her talk by mentioning the exhortation in Wednesday's reading from John's Gospel that "the truth will make you free" (John 8:31-42), Reid thanked Robinson for his honesty and said, "We have nothing to fear from speaking truth."

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- *NCR* editorial: [NCR endorses call for a new sexual ethic](#) [2], March 27
- Eugene Kennedy's column: [Bishop Robinson and the redemption of Eros](#) [3], March 20
- [Bishop urges change in 'church teaching concerning all sexual relationships'](#) [1], March 16
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