

'Whistleblower' priest urges full transparency for church leaders

Marie Rohde | Aug. 13, 2013
Milwaukee

Fr. James Connell, a retired Milwaukee priest who helped found a national network of clergy and sisters committed to reporting instances of sexual abuse within the church, offered advice Tuesday for Catholic leaders dealing with the pedophilia scandal: Come clean.

"Maybe there are other issues that are buried that they don't want us to hear about," Connell said at a luncheon of the Milwaukee Press Club. "Maybe there's something under the lid. I worry that there are other things there."

Connell, a founding member of Whistleblowers, noted that the 6,000 pages of documents released as part of the Milwaukee archdiocese's bankruptcy case represent only 10 percent of the documents contained in the court file.

"How much more damaging is the actual truth compared to what we are dreaming now?" Connell asked. "Jesus said 'the truth will set you free.'"

About half the priests serving in the Milwaukee archdiocese are affiliated with religious orders, and the archdiocese has refused to release records of reports of misconduct made against those men, saying that the orders are responsible for them.

Connell, a former vice chancellor of the Milwaukee archdiocese, took questions on a range of topics including a court decision on the transfer of some \$90 million to a cemetery trust fund and how he deals with those who have left the church because of the scandal.

When asked about the decision that the cemetery trust fund is untouchable by the victims who have filed claims in the Milwaukee archdiocese's bankruptcy, Connell pointed out that the cemetery trust fund covers only eight cemeteries in the archdiocese. Many others, including one affiliated with his last parish in Sheboygan, are not covered.

"We (the Sheboygan parish) don't have perpetual care agreements," said Connell, who worked as a certified public accountant before entering the priesthood. "It's not clear what the trust covers and what it does not."

Cemeteries that are still open have money coming in to "cut the grass and remove the snow," he said, adding that parish volunteers stepped forward in Sheboygan when he put out a call for assistance.

"By their numbers, the church has spent \$2 billion on the sexual abuse, and there is no resolution in sight," he said.

He noted that U.S. District Judge Rudolph Randa relied heavily on church law in finding that the money in the trust could not be touched.

"What came right off the page for me was what's not there," Connell said of the ruling.

Randa, he said, talked about the equity between the church and those who bought the graves, crypts and mausoleums. Canon law, he said, also takes into account common good when determining such matters. He said an actuarial study of how much money is needed to cover future expenses is needed.

He suggested that if all the money is not needed for the future care of the cemeteries, maybe the rest should be used for the common good.

Connell, who is a canon lawyer, also questioned the timing of the transfer of the money from the general fund to the separate trust. He noted that the transfer came just months after the archdiocese settled a claim brought by California victims of three Milwaukee priests. The victims were awarded \$16.65 million, about half paid by insurance, the rest by the archdiocese.

Why was the money not transferred a year earlier, five years earlier or 10 years earlier? Connell asked before noting that New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, then archbishop of Milwaukee, had written to the Vatican saying it was to protect the fund from lawsuits.

Connell, who has stood with survivors at press conferences and other events, said he has not been punished for his actions but said he knows of priests in other dioceses who have been chastised. One, he said, was told by his bishop to leave the diocese.

Only four other priests in the Milwaukee archdiocese have joined him in meeting regularly with survivors.

There are priests who in private say Im with you Jim, but only four have joined me, he said.

There have been fewer lets go have lunch invitations, but Im really a private person.

Connell, who is 70, said clearly this issue is my retirement project, adding that when he left his last parish assignment, many people came up to him and said keep up what youre doing.

Asked why he remains a Catholic, Connell said, I feel committed to do what I can do to change it and not run from it. He said he had considered not retiring until he reached 75 but said I want more freedom to do this and other things.

[Marie Rhode is a freelance writer based in Milwaukee.]

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