

MILWAUKEE Archbishop Rembert Weakland says he is older and grayer because of the flood of allegations of sexual misconduct involving priests.

Weakland, 67, who has been archbishop for 17 years, spoke at length about how the church has dealt with sexual misconduct involving priests, the growing concern about the financial impact of sexual abuse cases on the church, and the impact on the priests themselves.

Weakland was interviewed by Marie Rohde, The Journal's religion reporter.

Q.

Lots of allegations of sexual abuse of children by priests have been made public over the past couple of years. What's your assessment of the current situation and how the church handled the problem in the past?

A.

My feeling is that we did as well as anybody in the nation, and in some respects better. {We} certainly kept up with the advances in the area of psychology and how to handle cases of this sort {for} both victims and perpetrators. {Understanding of the dynamics} has grown over the years. I think we've kept up with it as well as anybody I know has and I would stand on that record.

It's easy to look back and say what you would have done 20 years ago with the knowledge you have now. I think we have done as well as we possibly could.

Q.

When you say "we," do you mean we the local church compared to the society as a whole, or are you speaking of the diocese compared to the rest of the church?

A.

The diocese. The difficulty in dealing with the diocese or the Catholic Church in this issue is there is not much to compare it to because we are about the only ones that really have kept track of our perpetrators. If something happens in a school district, the person could be out and gone forever.

Nobody has compared our handling of these cases with, let's say, the medical profession or the psychiatry profession. There's not much comparison because there's not much material. The Boy Scouts, for example. We know this is happening in the Boy Scouts, but they don't have the kind of track record of following up on their cases. So we're almost unique in terms of being able to examine the whole issue of pedophilia.

I think also there is a lot more scientific acumen. Twenty years ago if we were doing this interview I would have used the word pedophilia {or} maybe pederasty. The term pedophilia wasn't common then and I certainly wouldn't have made any of the distinctions that now I know one has to make. So today I would talk about ephebophilia more than pedophilia. In fact, I have never dealt with a pedophile.

I really haven't. According to the strict medical definitions, a pedophile is someone sexually attracted to kids before puberty. I really never had to deal with that.

Q.

What about Father William Effinger? {a priest convicted of sexual misconduct} Wasn't he accused with abusing girls and boys before the age of puberty?

A.

That's not been proven, I don't believe. If you mean in terms of admitted cases and provable cases, I can't think of any.

Q.

What is the age level again?

A.

{For an ephebophile, it} usually begins at puberty say 12 or 13. US law is up to 18. What happens so often in those cases is that they go on for a few years and then the boy gets a little older and the perpetrator loses interest. Then is when the squealing comes in and you have to deal with it. You wish you could {have gotten} it a little earlier, but. . . It is very hard sometimes to distinguish a real ephebophile from somebody who is sexually attracted to adults but picks up a younger person in a single case. And that happens quite often, it happens especially in terms of people who are picking up prostitutes; they don't realize that the person is as young as they are. Most often those people are not ephebophiles because it's not a trait but it's a single instance.

Those are often very difficult things to work through, but I have learned that there is a difference, and there's a difference in terms of function possibilities, in terms of rehabilitation. A real ephebophile or a real pedophile is much harder to do anything with psychologically than somebody who has picked up and had an affair with a younger person. My doctors agree.

Q.

Are you saying that these can be consensual acts {even if one is legally underage}?

A.

No, I'm not talking about that at all. I think the point is that in terms of trying to analyze the makeup of predators, you have to know a lot more about what they are being attracted to. It says nothing about morality. But if there's going to be any kind of healing processes or any kind of rehabilitation, you have to know what the case is. That's why I'm saying these distinctions have to be made.

Q.

What is ephebophilia exactly?

A.

Ephebophilia is when someone is sexually attracted to post-puberty up until {the age of} 16, 17, 18 the maximum. The interesting difference is that usually a pedophile is attracted to both sexes and it's pre-puberty and usually not ongoing. But an ephebophile might get started {with someone who is} age 13 and the ephebophile usually loses interest in a boy or girl when adulthood sets in. Then {the ephebophile} picks up another victim and it's very difficult to analyze the difference between an ephebophile and somebody who is {just} sexually attracted to that age level and goes through these multiple cases. The {relationships} usually last longer.

I think the point is that in terms of trying to analyze the makeup of predators, you have to know a lot more about what they are being attracted to.

Q.

Do you feel that an ephebophile can be returned to the ministry?

A.

Right now, I would have to say that I am still negative about that.

In the area of victims, we get a lot of good advice from the psychological community. I think that we have done better than many dioceses. If you were to call {the US Catholic Conference in Washington, D.C.} and asked what program to look at, they would say, "Look at Milwaukee, it's the state-of-the-art."

I think we've done well in terms of the victims and their grieving. We've worked that out well and are moving well on that. In terms of the perpetrators, I'd have to confess that the state-of-the-art is still pretty vague at this point in history.

I don't think there's the same sophistication as there is in treating victims. One of the reasons is that psychologists and psychiatrists don't want to deal with perpetrators. It's very hard to get the psychological community to deal with perpetrators. It's not as glamorous and they are afraid of being called on the witness stand.

Q.

You have said in the past that the Vatican has made it almost impossible to remove a priest, even one accused of pedophilia. Has that changed?

A.

{When the US Catholic bishops met} we got the latest document on that. As I understand it, the pope has raised the age of {adulthood} in the code {of church law} from 16 to 18 to correspond to our law. In most countries France, South America adulthood is 16. So he's raised that to 18 for us. He's also extended the statute of limitations to 10 years beyond when the minor reaches 18. There was some dispute among church lawyers over making this retroactive. As I understand it, it's five years beyond the age of 18 {for past cases}.

Q.

Is the church court procedure still a lengthy process?

A.

Yes. We've talked about setting up {regional church} courts in the United States so that each diocese won't have to do it. We might have a central court in Chicago, another in Los Angeles, to process cases. You need criminal lawyers, if that's the right word, for church law to process those cases. It's a lengthy and difficult {process}. We have to prove the guilt, otherwise the Vatican can reverse the decision and we start over again.

Q.

Were there any priests under the old system who were removed?

A.

We don't know of any.

Q.

Do you think there will be any under the new process?

A.

Yes, I do. I think it will be easier to process a case. {The US Conference of Bishops} has promised us a good manual on how to proceed.

Q.

What kind of sanctions can the church impose?

A.

An ephebophile or a pedophile could be stripped of his orders and sent out as a layperson. The church would not feel any responsibility toward him as an ex-priest.

Q.

Do you know of any cases in Milwaukee that could follow that process?

A.

I know of a few cases where the process could happen. I certainly don't want it to happen. I think a person should be given the option of leaving voluntarily {but} I think there are some cases that would fit the process.

Q.

I heard you have sent a letter to some of those who have been convicted of sexual misconduct strongly suggesting that for their own good and the good of the church that they leave.

A.

That's true.

Q.

Have any taken you up on it?

A.

We're negotiating that right now with several. I've gone overboard in terms of trying to be fair. I don't know of any diocese in the country that does what we do on that. I pay for their lawyers and I also let them hire a church lawyer. We pay for it so that they can never say that they didn't have a fair trial.

Q.

Earlier you've said you were concerned that kicking a man out of the priesthood might just be moving a problem to a different location. Is that still a concern?

A.

Yes. Doctors who have had experience with priest pedophiles asked the bishops not to be too precipitous in throwing the priest out. They felt that this was not fair to society, just to simply unload a problem. {In other parts of society} that's what happens. Most places simply fire you . . . teachers, Boy Scouts. It's an easier solution.

{The psychological experts} begged us to try to follow through with {abusers} in terms of trying to see what kind of rehabilitation is possible. And I think in most cases I find that the psychologists and psychiatrists who treat pedophiles, who treat perpetrators, tend to wander that way.

I think we bishops are kind of caught in the middle. We certainly believe in divine grace being able to help people and we want to do as much as we can to help people, not just throw them back to society. On the other hand, when it doesn't seem that's going to work, at a certain point you have to cut the cord.

I think St. Luke's and Johns Hopkins {two major treatment centers for priests} overestimate their success rate.

I mean, how many years do you have to go through this? They haven't been at this that long and now there's a whole new school {of thought} coming up. Johns Hopkins and St. Luke's have been following a kind of therapy based on the 12-steps. They consider it an addiction and use an addiction therapy. Then they send

them out with the same {Alcoholics Anonymous} mentality. Whether you can do that with sexual disorders is a big question.

I have to admit that I am fascinated by it. {But} I keep saying to myself, "How much can you rely on all of this and not get yourself in a hole down the road?" At a certain point one simply has to say we've done our best and that's it. Then that person has to find his way in the world. Taking the collar away might help those cases because, especially for those that have that knack of preying on the younger group, the collar is essential. It's almost an inborn tool that they need to gain the confidence, the trust {of those they abuse}.

Q.

How many cases are there in the country?

A.

We {the US bishops} debated this in San Diego, pulling together all our statistics. Some of us are willing to do that; many bishops are not. I think the reason is that they fear this could become the grounds for a million more lawsuits because of the {records that could be made public in lawsuits}. So they're very concerned . . . and it becomes very difficult to get the kind of statistics that would help answer that question.

Q.

Have the bishops responded together on this problem?

A.

I've always been much more in favor of a national policy. Most bishops say, "Let me handle mine."

Q.

Do you think you are any closer to a national policy?

A.

Yes, I think we are.

Q.

What kind of treatment should be provided to perpetrators?

A.

Well, what we are looking for now is better kinds of institutions. I would prefer a non-Catholic institution that is state-of-the-art to get a really good profile.

Q.

I had the impression that the Milwaukee Archdiocese preferred to treat perpetrators as outpatients here in town rather than to send them away for inpatient therapy.

A.

It varies. The advantage of the inpatient is that they get a better chance to look at a person to see how they will react. Often a pedophile or an ephobophile has a lot more {difficulties} in adult relationships. The in-house {treatment} could do much of that. On the other hand, it is also a hot house and that was part of the problem with the {treatment center run by the Paraclete order in} New Mexico. {Priests} were together all the time, it wasn't any kind of normal situation that they would be living in later.

So that's why the outpatient is often {favored}. Some are highly controlled treatment {programs}, where if

you are working in a place and there is a whole group around you that is a part of your evaluation. The hardest part of all of it is that nobody can really monitor somebody else's behavior 24 hours a day. I think that's impossible.

Q.

How are you dealing with your priests, the vast majority who have done nothing wrong? How has it affected morale?

A.

The priest morale has been very much affected by the issue. They feel if one is tainted, all are tainted. They feel their ministry is being watched. It's very hard now to get a priest to go on an outing with Boy Scouts or whatever. They just don't want to do it, it's difficult. I would say that the morale factor is going to be one of the major ones that we have to face as time moves on.

I don't know what to do with morale. I try to be sensitive to what is needed for morale.

Q.

How has it affected you?

A.

How has it affected me? I've become a lot grayer. I really have. I've aged . . . I don't think {the priests who have abused children} have any idea the repercussion of their acts on other people.

That's part of some of the therapy now. {To} try to get them to see that it's not just that victim, it's that family, that parish, that town that {are affected by} a single act.

I really, really wish I could get some psychologist to analyze more carefully for us, the bishops, why we have so many ephrophiles and not pedophiles. Nobody has come up with a good answer to that question. My first inclination was to say, "Oh, blame the old minor seminaries," because the minor seminaries had all those teenage boys together and they {continued to live} as adolescents {after ordination}, and never grew up sexually. But Peter Burns {a priest convicted of molesting} went to a public high school, so there goes my theory.

Q.

What can you can do in terms of screening seminary candidates?

A.

We go through the entire battery of tests and so gradually we are going to have to build some kind of profile that could give us an analysis of perpetrators.

Q.

Project Benjamin was established to deal with victims,

perpetrators, families, churches and everything else. Is Project Benjamin's primary role to deal with the victim?

A.

I think Project Benjamin is still dealing with the whole. I think it deals with victims, therapy. It also deals now with perpetrators.

Q.

What needs to be done?

A.

Somehow we have to find a way of saying, "What we are going to do with all of these people with sexual dysfunctions?" We can't put everybody in jail, shoot everybody. What kind of living space do you create for these people, how do you go about monitoring {them}?

Q.

What has been the effect of the settlements {to victims and families}?

A.

The settlements certainly are a financial burden for the diocese and I'm not sure yet how that will all play out. Some dioceses put everything in the hands of their insurance lawyers, who fought the cases, and that's why you have those lawsuits where they would {countersue} the parents, the victim or whatever. So the insurance lawyers are our major problem.

How will we deal with that? My feeling is that we are going to have to sue our insurance companies, but that's a whole other story. Every insurance company is reluctant to pay. I feel that the insurance companies are not sympathetic to the pastoral issues of the bishops.

Q.

Can you put a total dollar figure on how much this is costing the archdiocese?

A.

I can't. That's why, if {the bishops} could work as a {national group} and talk, it would be helpful to us to find out how other dioceses have handled the whole insurance issue and see if we can come together on this.

Q.

The insurance problem is a national one, isn't it?

A.

Actually this legitimately is quite a national story in this respect: Every diocese in the country right now has been stiffed by an insurance company, and it comes to a question of bad faith when you count on these insurance companies and they refuse to cover.

One of the reasons they refuse to cover is the so-called "first incident doctrine." Basically, if you have a clergyman who abuses in 1981, 1982 and 1983, the insurance company that had it in 1981 says that "I'm not going to cover it because there is more than one instance of abuse." Now that's irrational, but that's what they say. The insurance company in 1983 will refuse to cover it because they say the one who had it first should pay.

Q.

So what good is having insurance?

A.

It gives you the right to sue.

{Weakland then was asked about other issues involving priests.}

A.

I think the more serious issues I have to deal with {have to do with} the question of {preparing seminarians} . . . their psychosexual development, the lifestyles of the priest.

Once they leave {the seminary}, what kind of support systems do they need? Years ago, even when I first became a superior 30 years ago, I assigned a young priest to a parish and there were always five or six priests and the pastor was kind of the guard. There were all kinds of safeguards that we don't have today and really should have. It's just another world. The lifestyles of priests have changed greatly and the old kind of small family {doesn't exist anymore}. We have to give some serious thought to what a priest today needs.

Another story is the large number of gays who apply for the seminaries. Should we take them? What does that do in terms of the culture {of the seminary and the priesthood}? How does that alter things? That's a serious issue; we bishops talk about it in small groups but we've never publicly had a real good discussion on what that means right now.

Q.

Are you talking about men who are openly gay?

A.

Most are not openly gay. In the past they would not have been admitted.

Q.

So how do you deal with that issue?

A.

I think that there are probably differences of opinions among bishops as to how to treat it. I think every bishop would say whether the seminarian candidate's orientation is heterosexual or homosexual, celibacy is celibacy, so you try to at least make that part clear. And then how you're going to live it out becomes very problematic. You talk about it so that it's understood.

There are a larger number of gays living at the seminaries. I don't know if there is a connection to the larger number of ephebophiles.

Q.

Do you see a connection?

A.

If you wanted a blunt answer, I would say I think there can be a connection between {homosexual orientation} for a priest and an occasional relationship with a younger person. I think that can happen. Then you would have to make a distinction. In other words, I'm saying somebody who might be gay but whose normal orientation is toward adults might pick up the younger person. I think that could happen.

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