

Bishop hears flock anger and anguish over abuse

Victims attend 'town meeting' here to tell church leader of their concerns

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Laura Wenc knelt on the bench in Holy Spirit Catholic Church here, praying as she heard horror stories of alleged sexual abuse by priests.

The anguished and angry words came during a three-hour session Monday night, one of six "town meetings" throughout the Diocese of Birmingham called by Bishop David Foley. Their purpose is to allow victims and other concerned Catholics to voice their opinions on the sexual abuse scandal that has sent ripples through the 2,000-year-old church during recent months.

Wenc, a 36-year-old accountant, is a member at St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Madison. She was among several people who came to voice their support for church leaders. But she said she also felt empathy for the victims, who shared their pain as Foley listened intently before a crowd of about 200 people.

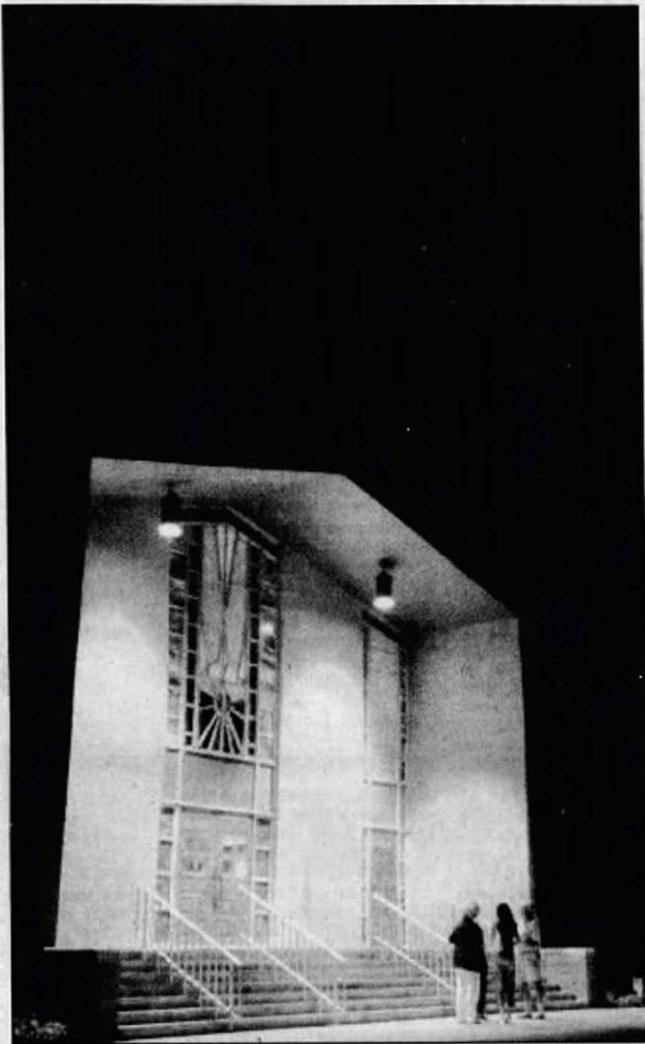
"I was praying the rosary for the victims," said Wenc, who has entertained thoughts of becoming a nun. Wenc said her sister was a victim of sexual abuse, "so I know the hurt they are experiencing. There is a lot of anger, and more Catholics should have been here.

"We are a forgiving church and we need to have faith in our hierarchy," she said.

Many others came not to praise, but to criticize the bishop over the church's handling of abuse cases.

At the start, Foley asked for forgiveness and took responsibility for not responding more to those who contend they've been victimized by priests during his tenure.

"We're in such a crisis and scandal ... and the problem, my brothers and



Eric Schultz/Huntsville Times

People gather in front of Holy Spirit Catholic Church as hundreds listen to Bishop David Foley inside. Foley was in town Monday night to discuss the recent sex abuse scandals involving the Catholic church.

sisters, is that I am part of the scandal," he said. "As a bishop I have to come before you and first ask for forgiveness."

"Do not spare me tonight," Foley said. "I need to hear your anger, your frustration and your confusion."

The first to address Foley — Robert

W. Wilford — came from Jonesboro, Ark., where he lives with his wife, Diane. Although his story was more than four decades old, he read his allegation of four years of abuse by a priest, the Rev. Charles V. Cross, at the

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Bishop

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Church of the Blessed Sacrament in Birmingham. Cross later served at St. Ann's Church in Decatur.

It was the same story Wilford told at Birmingham's St. Paul Church's public session May 25: He said he'd attempted to get church officials to remove Cross from the priesthood in 1993, but was offered a monetary settlement to drop the request since the statute of limitations had expired. He refused and continued fighting.

Cross has denied molesting anyone, calling Wilford's allegations "disgusting" and motivated by money.

Wilford first went to the Birmingham diocese with his claims nearly nine years ago. He sued the priest in 1995 seeking \$2 million, but the case was thrown out because of the age of his claims.

Wilford renewed his charges amid the current wave of allegations involving sexual abuse by priests.

Foley announced last month that Cross, 68, had been stripped of the right to conduct services and would retire June 1.

Wilford said, reading from a prepared statement, "I had been raped three times — by Cross, my church leaders in 1993 and 1994 who did not respond to my story when I first came forward, and now my church leaders with their heinous actions."

The day after the meeting at St. Paul's Church, the bishop met with Wilford for more than an hour. Wilford said Foley apologized for not responding to him, but had been advised not



"I had been raped three times — by (the Rev. Charles) Cross, my church leaders in 1993 and 1994 who did not respond to my story."

Robert W. Wilford, reading from a prepared statement

to by the church's attorney.

"I think it's important for you to hear from my lips what it means to be raped physically, psychologically, emotionally and spiritually," he told Foley as his wife dabbed tears from her eyes. "You can never make it up to me. It is something I will have to live with the rest of my life."

Wilford said some sexual encounters he was forced to have

with Cross occurred in the rectory at St. Ann's Church.

After the session, Wilford said that despite the abuse and betrayal, he has remained a Catholic. But he believes Catholics need to stop putting priests "on a pedestal."

"The infallibility doctrine of the church is hogwash," he said. "It's supposed to be based on faith and morals, but sexual molestation has gone on for years. It is run by fallible men."

Since Wilford's story was first published, he said, three people, including two former classmates, have contacted him about being abused by Cross.

Eddie Schaft of Decatur, who said he was a victim of priest sexual abuse in the early 1990s, contended bishops were simply moving the abusers from one parish to another.

"The current sex scandal in the Catholic Church in the U.S. is fundamentally about the rape of teen-age boys by homosexual priests," said Schaft. "The bishops have facilitated it by knowingly reassigning these monsters from parish to parish."

Schaft said the priests and bishops have had "complete disregard for God, for mankind — and especially the lack of any regard for the precious, innocent children. That is the hellish reality we face."

He said the priest "caused much pain for me and my family." He expressed even more anger toward Foley, who intently listened as Schaft accused him of "seriously reassigning this man from parish to parish ..."

Schaft then told Foley he would "pray that God will give you the grace and compassion for practicing Catholics who have been victimized by evil priests ..."

With that he quickly exited the building as others were lining up to address the bishop.

Some, such as representatives from the Children's National Advocacy Center and the Crisis Center of North Alabama, came to offer their services in helping the church implement a plan for preventing child abuse by priests.

Dr. Frankie Preston, a psychologist who leads a sexual-offender course in Huntsville, addressed the bishop about a proposed code of conduct for priests that the nation's bishops will discuss this month in Dallas. He had several concerns about the wording of the proposal and believes the new version "will engineer more clerical abuse."

Preston used as an example what he said is the proposed code's instruction that an accused priest be allowed to hold a private, but not public, Mass. Preston said that would only encourage a predator priest.

Speakers Monday night placed much of the blame for the scandal on the church hierarchy.

Lynne Hartman of Huntsville said she thinks the Vatican "is not getting it" when it comes to the seriousness of the problem.

"I don't see much moral authority in the hierarchy," said Hartman. "I don't see too many of the hierarchy being accountable. They need to acknowledge the laity. The pain (from sexual abuse) is unimaginable. There is lifelong spiritual and emotional abuse, and the victims need to be compensated by the church."

Larry and Gerry Richard of Huntsville were there primarily to listen.

"I was surprised at some of the rudeness and hatred for the hierarchy," said Larry Richard. "I don't know that it was right to do that."

His wife, however, said she felt compassion for the victims and believes the event "will make us stronger. We will be united and there will be a cleaning by the Holy Spirit."

Monsignor Michael Sexton, pastor of St. John Church in Madison, acted as the facilitator.

In his opening remarks, he called the nationwide mushrooming of sexual-abuse allegations a "very sad, sad, chapter in the church" in addition to the way it has been "handled or mishandled." He asked the audience, "How can we help heal the wounds in the church? What can we do collectively or individually to prevent it from happening and to reach out to the victims and help them?"

"I thought we had a very good session," he said following the event. "There are a lot of hurting people out there, and we just need to be supportive. We just need to learn the value of listening to people. It's the beginning of change."

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