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COMING CLEAN: After a tearful confession, members of Rev. Michael Allen's parish line up to offer their support after it was announced that he would stay at St. Peter Catholic Church in Celestine, Ind. Allen acknowledged to his congregation that he had had a sexual relationship with a teenage boy who lost his father years ago in Celestine. Instead of shunning their priest, parishioners forgave him.

Despite anger, some parishes forgive their pedophile priests

RELIGION: An Indiana parish gives their priest a second chance instead of shunning him and demanding he leave.

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CELESTINE, Ind. — Week in, week out, year after year, German immigrants in this small farm town have passed through the doors of St. Peter Celestine Catholic Church to marry, mourn and confess their sins.

On a recent Sunday, though, it was their priest who was confessing, acknowledging to his congregation a sexual relationship he had years ago with a teenage boy.

The parishioners in the town's only church bowed their heads and prayed. And instead of shunning Rev. Michael Allen, they forgave him. The priest's bishop also said Allen deserved a second chance.

"We've been praying to accept Father as he is now, to forgive him and move on," said Martha Schepers, 65, who leads a church prayer group in this town 130 miles southwest of Indianapolis. "He is a human being. I don't think it should be up to us to judge."

At Celestine, "people deal with problems easily," said parishioner Dana Gehlhausen, 18. The allegations shocked those in the church, "but they got over it."

Parishioners nationwide have shown little patience as allegations of sexual abuse by priests increase. Almost four in five Catholics surveyed in a recent poll said priests who have sexually abused children or teenagers one time should be forbidden from participating in parish life.

The CBS-New York Times poll of 1,172 adults was taken the last week in April and has an error margin of plus or minus 3 percentage points, larger for the sub-sample of Catholics.

But in a handful of places like Celestine, church members have stood in support of their priests. Like some bishops, some church members question whether a one-strike-and-out policy is the proper avenue for the church.

In Maine's St. John Valley, parishioners rallied around two priests who admitted abusing a teenage boy more than 20 years ago. At Sacred Heart of Jesus Christ in New Orleans, some 300 parishioners signed a petition on behalf of a priest removed because of allegations of inappropriate encounters with two youths in the 1980s.

And in Oak Brook, Ill., parishioners rallied around Rev. John F. Barrett, who said he was falsely accused. At a news conference, some held signs saying, "We love you, Fr. John."

Experts say parishioner response to abuse allegations often depends on how much they admired the priest before the accusations.