

Abuse crisis concerns local Catholic leaders

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It's talked about in the church parking lot, after meetings and over coffee following Mass, but the pedophilia crisis has not yet been a topic in the pulpit of St. Pius X Catholic Church in Billings.

This will soon change, said the Rev. Steve Tokarski. "The heartache and dismay and sadness" caused by the crisis will not be healed through avoidance, he said.

"At some point I'm going to need to address it. People are disheartened, discouraged, scandalized. I think I have a responsibility to speak publicly in a weekend homily."

Tokarski is not yet sure what he will say. He's still trying to make sense of it himself. Nothing in his three decades of priesthood compares with the shadow cast by the scandal, he said.

"In the course of 34 years, it's like going from the age of innocence to



DAVID GRUBBS/Gazette staff

Father Steve Tokarski in St. Pius church in Billings. "At some point I'm going to need to address it. People are disheartened, discouraged, scandalized," Tokarski said of allegations of sexual abuse involving priests nationwide.

where we are now," Tokarski said.

The scandal now engulfing the American church emerged in Boston in January with the revelation that a former priest had been moved from parish to parish following accusations of sexual abuse.

Prosecutors said Thursday they are

investigating about 50 complaints of child sexual abuse, including up to 22 against a defrocked priest who worked as an elementary school counselor in St. Louis.

As outrage over the scandal has

Please see Concern, 8A

Concern

Continued from 1A

spread, bishops and priests around the nation have begun addressing the issue publicly. The bishop of the Diocese of Cheyenne, Wyo., recently urged the state's 41 priests to talk about it during Mass.

The Diocese of Great Falls-Billings recently provided priests in Eastern Montana with information on the issue — including messages from the pope and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. But diocese officials are not pushing priests to discuss the issue, said the Rev. Jay Peterson, vicar general. Individual priests must make their own decisions about addressing the matter, he said.

The Rev. David Reichling, of St. Bernard's Parish, said he has no plans to formally address the crisis during his weekend homilies.

"It doesn't seem so prevalent out here," he said. "We had a prayer petition last week for healing and renewal, but we hadn't planned anything else. ... Nobody's been talking much about it."

Reichling said the scandal has caused a "media feeding frenzy," but the Catholic Church will ultimately emerge intact.

"The church has done worse things than this. My God, we've had inquisitions, reformations, the crusades," Reichling said. "I think the Holy Spirit will lead us right through."

Currently, there are no lawsuits against the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings alleging the sexual abuse of children, said Max Davis, a Great Falls attorney who represents the diocese.

A lawsuit against former Miles City priest Kirk Morgan was settled out of court two years ago. Two young men sued Morgan in federal court in Billings, claiming Morgan molested and assaulted them beginning in 1996. Details of the settlement were kept secret.

The diocese is currently investigating one allegation of misconduct by a priest, Davis

said. He declined to give details.

Although the diocese said it reports confirmed cases of child abuse to civil authorities, allegations are first investigated by a team from the bishop's office. The accused is placed on paid leave while the matter is investigated.

"People have made claims we've determined are not valid," Davis said. "I've had people call us with all kinds of allegations. ... I've had people call up and make claims about dead priests, which makes it somewhat difficult to investigate."

Although Pope John Paul II mentioned the "grave scandal" during his annual pre-Easter message, Reichling, of St. Bernard's, was disappointed there was no discussion of ordaining women or allowing priests to marry.

"The seminaries are empty," Reichling said. "Scandals like this aren't helping."

The crisis is prompting those within the church to become more cautious, said Tokarski, of St. Pius. The diocese already requires all employees and volunteers to sign a statement outlining the diocese's child-abuse policy, which was instituted in 1995 and revised last year. Children may not spend the night in a church rectory without a parent, for example.

For the church to regain trust, the scandal must be confronted and drastic changes initiated, said Roger Beeter, a longtime member of St. Patrick's Cathedral. Mainly, the church needs to be open about sexual-abuse problems, he said.

"Everybody just detests what's going on. It's disgusting," he said. "It's unfortunate the way the hierarchy has swept it under the rug."

Beeter said he tries to insulate his own faith from the "politics and people" who devise church rules. "This isn't going to change my beliefs," he said.

If nothing else, he hopes the church learns that secrecy can also be a sin.

"They better talk," Beeter said of church leaders. "They better talk a lot."

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