Templeton Religion Reporter of the Year

Pedophile priest lives near school

A n admitted pedophile priest from Davenport, Iowa, whose diocese sent him to a treatment center for priests in Jefferson County has left the residence and is living in an apartment in University City about 750 feet from an elementary school.

The Rev. William Wiebler, 72, "is beyond our power," said Rand Wonio, an attorney for the Davenport Diocese. "It's our understanding that he didn't want to live there anymore, and he's living on his own."

Wiebler entered St. John Vianney Renewal Center in Dittmer in 2002, after admitting abusing several minors during the 1970s and '80s.

Wonio said that although officials at the Davenport Diocese did not know where Wiebler was living, they believed that it was somewhere near the treatment center and that Wiebler was "still visiting the center for outpatient treatment."

"We implored him to stay," said Wonio. "We don't want anyone else to be victimized by this man, but our legal right to force him to do anything is limited."

The Rev. Peter Lechner, director of St. John Vianney, said he would not comment on specific priests. He said that the center did not offer outpatient treatment and that it had a strict policy about leaving the campus. "They can only leave when they get permission from us," he said. "But we don't have the power to actually make them stay, other than if they don't agree with our policy, they have to go."

Lechner said "not too many" men leave the center before they are officially ready. He described the center as a long-term care facility in which some priests stay indefinitely if that is their diocese's request and said that if a priest leaves prematurely, "we always inform the diocese."

Wiebler lives in a University City apartment building in the 700 block of Leland Avenue, 750 feet from Delmar-Harvard elementary school, and about 1,500 feet from Julia Goldstein preschool.

Victoria Gonzalez-Rubio, principal of Delmar-Harvard, had not heard of Wiebler, but said, "You're always concerned about these things." She said the school communicates concepts like "reasonable requests" to the children and tells them that when they leave the school, they should do so in groups.

The man who answered the phone at Wiebler's number Tuesday evening said, "He's not here." Asked if the person on the phone was Wiebler, the man said, "He's gone," and hung up. An answering machine greeting Wednesday said, in the same voice, "I'm going to New York. Leave a message."

Neighbors described Wiebler as "quite eccentric," "overly friendly and enthusiastic" and "bizarre." Mimi Hubert, Wiebler's upstairs neighbor, said he often sits dressed in only a thin robe on a swing on his flower-filled, second-floor back porch. On Tuesday, a smiley-face helium balloon was tied to the porch rail.

Wiebler's downstairs neighbor, Steve Jones, said Wiebler moved into the building in early summer and never mentioned that he was a priest. He said he had seen Wiebler wearing a "robe-type thing" around the building.

Hubert said that because of the apartment building's proximity to the schools, "there are always kids running through the back yard." Hubert recently learned about Wiebler's history as a pedophile and said his proximity to these children made her uncomfortable.

"He should not be down the street from a grade school," she said. "I'm surprised he's allowed to be so close."

Wonio said that the Davenport Diocese learned that Wiebler had left the treatment center "a few weeks ago," and that the St. Louis County prosecutor's office was immediately informed, as was the St. Louis Archdiocese.

Irene Prior Loftus, chancellor of the Davenport Diocese, said that she could not remember when the diocese found out Wiebler had left St. John Vianney, but that as soon as the diocese did know, "the first thing we did was to try to get him back into treatment, and when it was clear he wouldn't do that, we notified the county prosecutor."

Don Schneider, a spokesman for St. Louis County Prosecutor Robert McCullough, confirmed that his office had been contacted by the Davenport diocese's attorney about Wiebler. People in the prosecutor's office familiar with the situation said the contact had come "a few months ago."

The prosecutor's office then contacted the University City Police Department to let it know that Wiebler was now living in their neighborhood, according to Schneider.

Wiebler would not have been required to register on the Missouri sex offender registry because he has not been convicted of any sexual crime.

Capt. Ernest Green of the University City police confirmed that a letter had been sent from the county prosecutor's office to inform police of Wiebler's arrival. Green said there had been no complaints filed against Wiebler.

Attorney Patrick Noaker of St. Paul, Minn., has several clients who say they were sexually abused by Wiebler when they were children. "They (the Davenport diocese) didn't tell anybody he'd left," he said. "And they made representations to us that he was (at St. John Vianney center) while they knew he was gone."

Noaker said that during a mediation meeting between one of his clients and the Davenport diocese Sept. 2, diocesan attorneys said the staff at the St. John Vianney center notified the diocese when Wiebler left. Wiebler's current neighbors say he's been living in the
building in University City since at least early summer.

Lechner, the director of St. John Vianney, said it is the responsibility of the diocese and bishop where the priest comes from, not the treatment center, to know a problem priest's location in the community.

"The diocese has the final responsibility to make known the priest's whereabouts, to make it known if he's a danger," he said. "Unless a priest is laicized, he remains the responsibility of his bishop." Woono said the bishop of Davenport, William E. Franklin, had formally requested that the Vatican laicize (or defrock) Wiebler, but that the Vatican had not yet responded.

In a written statement, the St. Louis Archdiocese said Wednesday that it had not heard of Wiebler until Friday, when it received a phone call from Loftus, the chancellor of the Davenport Diocese. According to the statement, the call was simply to inform church officials here that Wiebler was living in the archdiocese.

"The archdiocese is unfamiliar with (Wiebler's) background and has no jurisdiction over him," the statement reads, "particularly because his faculties -- his rights to act as a priest -- were taken away from him by Davenport."

Wiebler was a priest at Our Lady of Lourdes Parish in Bettendorf, Iowa, until 1985, when he moved to Mississippi until his retirement in 1991.

In 2002, Bishop Franklin sent Wiebler to the St. John Vianney center and issued what he called "the strongest canonical action possible at the time, which bound Father Wiebler with specific obligations."

Those obligations included "to continue treatment and to comply to the fullest extent with all those involved in his treatment program... to refrain from all contact with minors... to further avoid all places and situations that, from past experience, have been occasions of serious temptation in areas of sexual morality."

Noaker said four civil lawsuits are pending against Wiebler for child sexual abuse in Davenport between 1969 and 1973. Wiebler has never been charged with any crime, said Noaker, because the statute of limitations for criminal charges had run out for those who accused Wiebler of abuse. "We're scared he might be hurting kids down there," Noaker said.
Templeton Religion Reporter of the Year

After agonizing split, church faction returns to its home

They are neighbors, some of them for decades. They look out for each other's kids, they go to the same restaurants, their parents and grandparents are buried in the same cemetery. And they once sat next to each other in a little church in Town and Country. But in February, those neighbors, the congregation of Church of the Good Shepherd, voted to split.

By a wide margin -- 84 to 14 -- parishioners voted to follow their rector, the Rev. Paul R. Walter, and leave the Episcopal Church USA, which they believed was wandering far from its traditional Anglican roots. The congregation would leave the Episcopal Church, but stay in the building that had housed them since 1958.

The split at Church of the Good Shepherd is an example of the possible rupture within the Episcopal Church USA, whose 2.4 million members make up about 3 percent of the 77 million members of what is often called the "worldwide Anglican Communion." The Communion is the global network of parishes affiliated with the church of Canterbury in England, the ecclesiastical center of the Anglican world.

According to their conservative critics, the bishops of the Episcopal Church USA are in brazen rebellion of traditional church doctrine and teaching that is more popular in the rest of the Anglican world. Though the current controversy was sparked by the election of an openly gay man, V. Gene Robinson, to be bishop of New Hampshire, there are deeper differences - - about values, tradition and orthodoxy -- at the core of the debate within the global Anglican church.

On Sunday afternoon, about 100 people settled into the pews at Good Shepherd. Among them were the 14 who voted against leaving the Episcopal Church back in February. By casting a "no" vote, they had cast themselves out of the church building. Along with the 14 were Missouri's Episcopal Bishop, George Wayne Smith, and dozens of other supporters, who came to celebrate a court order returning to them a church building they had always believed was rightly theirs. Now they were back, singing Psalm 146 to the sound of their organ.

"Put not your trust in rulers, nor in any child of earth, for there is no help in them," they sang. "When they breathe their last, they return to earth, and in that day their thoughts perish."

Just two miles away, a crowd of about 200 gathered in a ballroom at the St. Louis Marriott West, festively decorated and set up to look like the inside of a church. Among them were members of the 84 who voted to leave the Episcopal Church USA in February. Since then, the same court order that gave one group of neighbors its church back, forced another to leave the pews of Good Shepherd for the metal, folding chairs of a hotel ballroom.

Two bunches of roses, gifts from a member of St. Stanislaus Kostka Catholic parish, sat on the altar. In a service that lasted 90 minutes, the parishioners prayed hard and hugged each other. A choir and piano accompanied them as they belted out Psalm 24.

The St. Louis area is not a particularly Episcopalian place. As of January, there were 14,600 members of the Episcopal Church in the Episcopal diocese of Missouri (which encompasses the eastern half of the state), 9,000 members in St. Louis County and 6,500 members of the Springfield, Ill., diocese (which encompasses the southern part of the state.) By comparison, there are 555,000 Catholics in the St. Louis archdiocese, and 40,000 members of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in St. Louis County.

Certainly Robinson's election was something Walter and most of his Good Shepherd flock strongly disagreed with but, like the national feeling among conservative Episcopalians toward Robinson's election, it represented only part of the picture.

Even before the February vote, most Good Shepherd parishioners did not feel comfortable with Smith, Missouri's bishop. They felt his understanding of Scripture conflicted with their own, and that he represented a liberal Episcopal theology they reject.

In the days before the February vote, Smith offered to step aside. He told the members of Good Shepherd that if it would keep them in the Episcopal Church USA, they could have a more conservative -- but still Episcopal -- authority preside over their parish.

But Smith's offer didn't resonate. Four days later, most voted to leave the Episcopal Church USA and follow Walter to the Anglican Mission in America, an arm of the Anglican Province of Rwanda. During the controversy over Robinson's election, some conservative African bishops offered to lend their ecclesiastical authority to American parishes disenchanted with their own liberal-leaning bishops.

Walter, who had since become ordained as a priest in the Rwandan province, and his flock would now be under the authority of Archbishop Emmanuel Musaba Kolini from the Anglican diocese of Kigali. A spokesperson for the Anglican Mission in America said the mission has about 70 parishes across the country and about 15,000 members. He said 60 percent of
those churches have been started since
the mission's inception in summer 2000.
When Walter and his congregation
tried to change Good Shepherd's
affiliation from "Episcopal" to
"Anglican," the Missouri diocese
immediately filed court documents to
retain ownership of the church and its
property. But it would take St. Louis
County Associate Circuit Judge Mary
Bruntrager Schroeder nearly eight
months to decide the case.

The Sunday after the February vote,
Smith called Carie Kennedy, one of the
14 Good Shepherd parishioners who
voted against leaving the Episcopal
Church. He asked her to try to convene
the 14 at her house that Wednesday.
Fifty-two people showed up. Through e-
mail and phone trees, some parishioners
who, in the preceding years had left
Good Shepherd because of Walter's
conservative style, found out about the
Wednesday meeting and came, hoping to
hear a plan.

For the 14 who left after the vote, and
the dozens of others who had fled before
that, the reasons for leaving Good
Shepherd that day were matter of fact.
"They changed the church to be
Anglican," said Audrey Couch of Town
and Country, who had been attending the
church for 40 years before February. "I
was born an Episcopalian, so I had to
leave."

What Couch and others heard that
night at Kennedy's house was simple —
one a month, the group would meet at
someone's home. They would pray and
they would hope. This would keep them
together until the judge's ruling. The
Rev. James H. Purdy, rector of nearby
St. Peter's parish in Ladue, offered to
provide clergy for their services.

At one such meeting over the summer,
on Dana St. John's screened-in porch, a
dozen people, including the tall, lanky
Purdy, squeezed together under a ceiling
fan to worship. "(Purdy) had to keep
ducking his head because of the fan," said
St. John.

At the same time, the group at Good
Shepherd was thriving, according to
Walter. Over the summer, more families
began coming to church, some traveling
from as far as Springfield, Ill., 120 miles
away. "We were retaining our members
and keeping 80 to 90 percent of our
visitors each week," Walter said.

Then on Oct. 12, Judge Schroeder
ruled in favor of the Missouri diocese in
the Good Shepherd case, saying the
parishioners' majority vote was
insufficient to amend the church's
articles of association.

Almost immediately after Schroeder's
ruling, Walter and his congregation
vacated Good Shepherd, and since the
end of October, have been worshipping
at the Marriott. "We didn't lose a single
family after we left," said Walter. "It's a
great lesson for us -- a church is people,
not buildings."

Walter is unfazed by the hotel's cost of
"around $1,000" each week and the
prospect of finding another church.
"We're not troubled by our money
issues," he said. "Our congregation has
plenty of financial resources. . . . We are
a family at peace." He said the parish is
looking for existing church buildings or
land to buy, and that the congregation is
sponsoring several young men in
seminary and creating priests for the new
province at a rapid rate. The
congregation will have Christmas Eve
services at the Marriott, but will then
move to other temporary facilities at The
Lodge Des Peres as they continue to
look for a permanent home.

On Sunday, in a sermon based on the
gospel of Matthew, Walter, dressed in
purple vestments, spoke on the theme of
disappointment. "The human condition is
such that we are filled with
disappointment," he said.

"Sometimes, we have so many
disappointments imposed upon us
because we live in a fallen world.
Sometimes things that should have gone
our way didn't because of the hate and
every of another," he said. "In the world's
way of thinking, it's crazy, but love and
giveness are the only antidotes to that
disappointment."

A few hours later Bishop Smith,
dressed in purple vestments, a white
miter and carrying a shepherd's crozier,
"I don't have much time left, and I needed to be sure I would be with my mother and my daughter," she said.

Smith's sermon about hope and the difficult road ahead seemed to have hit home, even for a woman with little hope for her own future. "We're going to struggle," Braznell said about her congregation, her neighbors. "But we're going to make it."
When does a vote become a sin?

St. Louis Archbishop Raymond Burke spells out what he calls three narrow conditions under which a Catholic could vote for an abortion rights supporter without committing a grave sin.

In a pastoral letter published Friday, Archbishop Raymond Burke tackled one of the stickiest issues he has faced so far as the leader of St. Louis' Roman Catholics. The letter addressed the sensitive topic of voting, sin and Holy Communion, and it delved into the moral law that the archbishop says dictates how Catholics in a secular democratic society must choose their leaders using the teachings of the church as their guide. The letter itself was Burke's attempt at a final statement on a topic that has dominated his first summer as the city's prelate. It also was meant as a pastoral guide to clarify the subject that, he has said, has been confusing for St. Louis Catholics.

For reasons that have as much to do with election year presidential politics as Catholic moral teaching, local and national news media gave Burke's comments on Catholic politicians and voting great attention over the summer, and there was rampant speculation as to why he had -- to use a familiar phrase of the summer -- flip-flopped by September. While it remains to be seen how politically influential the new St. Louis archbishop will be in next month's elections, area Catholics could be a key voting bloc, especially in the closely contested races for president and Missouri governor. There are more than 550,000 Catholics in the St. Louis Archdiocese.

In June, Burke said it was a grave sin for Catholics to vote for a politician who supports abortion rights. Last month, he seemed to soften that stance by saying that only if a Catholic were to vote for a politician who supports abortion rights because of that politician's position on the issue, would the voter be committing a grave sin.

However, he said at the time, if a Catholic were to vote for a politician who supports abortion rights despite his own moral opposition to abortion rights, and was voting for that politician for what he called "proportionate reasons," the vote itself would not be a grave sin and therefore would not require a trip to the confessional before receiving Communion. Burke said at the time that he could not think of what those proportionate reasons could be.

In the 8,500-word pastoral letter, entitled "On Our Civic Responsibility for the Common Good," Burke explains the conditions -- which he calls extremely narrow -- under which a Catholic may, in good conscience, vote for a candidate who is not exactly in line with the church's moral teaching.

The three conditions are: There is no other candidate who supports church teaching 100 percent; the voter personally opposes the immorality of some of the candidate's positions but is supporting the candidate for other, morally good positions the candidate holds; and the voter tells anyone who knows how he or she voted that his or her vote was cast for the candidate's moral, not immoral, positions.

Burke says the only instance in which a Catholic may vote for such a candidate is when none of the candidates running for a particular office agree completely with the church on issues Burke lays out as priorities for the Catholic voter: abortion, embryonic stem cell research, euthanasia, cloning and same-sex marriage. The archbishop would not comment on his letter Friday. The Rev. Edward J. Richard, professor of moral theology at Kenrick-Glennon Seminary and the official archdiocesan spokesman on the pastoral letter, explained one segment of the letter to mean that if there is a candidate who agrees with the church on those five priority issues and a Catholic votes for his or her opponent, the Catholic voter has committed a grave sin and must attend confession before receiving Communion.

Burke also says Catholics have to prioritize issues when deciding on a candidate. "The sum total of social conditions," he writes, "embraces a wide spectrum of concerns which the Catholic voter must have before his or her eyes...." But in considering that spectrum, Burke says, there is "a certain order of priority which must be followed ... the first consideration must be given to the protection of human life itself, without which it makes no sense to consider other social conditions."

The belief among some Catholics that a candidate's position on the death penalty and war are as important as his or her position on abortion or same-sex marriage "is not true," writes Burke. "One cannot justify a vote for a candidate who promotes intrinsically evil acts which erode the very foundation of the common good, such as abortion and same-sex marriage," by appealing to that same candidate's opposition to war or capital punishment.

Burke's words seem to be at odds, however, with a 2002 Vatican document that addresses the issue of voting. "The Christian faith is an integral unity, and thus it is incoherent to isolate some particular element to the detriment of the whole of Catholic doctrine. A political commitment to a single isolated aspect of the Church's social doctrine does not exhaust one's responsibility towards the common good,...," reads the Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life. The document was issued from an office of the Vatican called the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which is headed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the chief orthodoxy watchdog for the church. Oddly, Burke's
position does agree with part of Ratzinger's personal opinion, laid out in a memo to Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick of Washington in June. (Please see accompanying article).

Ratzinger wrote: "Not all moral issues have the same moral weight as abortion and euthanasia. For example, if a Catholic were to be at odds with the Holy Father on the application of capital punishment or on the decision to wage war, he would not for that reason be considered unworthy to present himself to receive Holy Communion. . . . There may be a legitimate diversity of opinion even among Catholics about waging war and applying the death penalty, but not however with regard to abortion and euthanasia."

The fact remains, however, according to Burke's letter, that as long as the many specific conditions are met, and the voter has weighed the proportionate reasons, a Catholic can vote for a candidate who supports abortion rights.

Voters' proportionate reasons often turn out to be social issues important to traditional Catholic moral teaching -- issues such as capital punishment, war, the environment and poverty. In his letter, Burke says these proportionate reasons are not as important as his priority reasons. "Procured abortion and homosexual acts are intrinsically evil, and, as such, can never be justified in any circumstance. Although war and capital punishment can rarely be justified, they are not intrinsically evil; neither practice includes the direct intention of killing innocent human beings."

St. Louis Catholics should not be surprised by their new archbishop's focus on life issues. In a January interview with the archdiocesan newspaper, the St. Louis Review, Burke was asked about his priorities as the new bishop in town.

"In the moral teaching regarding social justice, the first teaching is the dignity of every human life from the moment of conception to natural death," he said. "If we don't teach that, there isn't much else that we can teach that will make much sense."

Asked recently whether he thought abortion should be illegal in the United States, Burke said, simply, "Yes." Asked whether he thought the criminalization of abortion was possible at this point, he said: "Yes. It's been illegal in the past . . . . I think society would have to work very vigorously to help women who are having a difficult pregnancy so that they know they don't have to resort to abortion."

Burke recognizes that many in St. Louis think he is abortion-obsessed, but he says it's not the case.

"Why am I so focused on the abortion issue? I'm so focused on it because it's an attack on an innocent, defenseless human life," he said. "But that's not my only focus. . . . I think people have this image of me -- I get up in the morning, and all I think about is abortion until I go to bed at night. I'm deeply concerned about it, and I don't want to in any way minimalize that, but I realize there's a whole range of life issues I have to be concerned about."
Gregory's term is ending
Bishop will welcome more time with his people

In the last days of his term as leader of the nation's Catholic bishops, Belleville's Bishop Wilton Gregory speaks wistfully of his first six weeks in office. He calls them his "six weeks of peace."

In those first weeks, much was made of the fact that he was the first African-American bishop to head the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. The media, he said, also played up his Catholic beginnings. Gregory was the first convert to be president of the conference -- his parents were nondenominationally Christian but sent their son to a Catholic school in Chicago. He also was the head of a sleepy diocese in the Midwest.

"Those are the things people kept coming back to: He's black, he's a convert, he's from a small, rural diocese," he said in an interview at his Belleville office this week. "And then after six weeks, on Sunday, Jan. 6th, the first article of the Globe aired, and all of the other three issues seemed to pale in comparison."

That Gregory remembers the date of the first Boston Globe article about a Catholic priest who sexually abused young boys, and his frequent use of the words "intense" and "unrelenting" to describe his tenure, say much about what his life has been like for the past three years. The Globe article led an investigation by the newspaper on the scandal the bishop would have to deal with his entire term.

Wilton Gregory Sr., the bishop's father, says, "I'm glad to see him done with the presidency thing. There's lots of pressure, and he handled it. I think he did a wonderful job, but it's tough for a parent to see his child in that atmosphere."

On Monday, the nation's bishops will elect a new president, and Gregory will return full time to Belleville, tired and bruised from years of guiding the bishops through the roughest time in the history of the American Catholic church.

"I am looking forward to some downtime," said Gregory. "This episode has been so intense and so unrelenting that I just want some downtime for a while."

That Gregory faced an unenviable situation is undisputed, even by his critics. There is more debate about the specific choices he made as the bishops' president, and about whether or not he will be rewarded by the Vatican with a bigger diocese, and potentially a cardinal's red hat.

"The poor man went through an ordeal. The mistakes of a lot of people were on his plate," said the Rev. Richard John Neuhaus, editor of First Things, a conservative Catholic magazine.

"Regardless of what we thought of the decisions he made, we all have to recognize that he labored heroically under very difficult circumstances."

Laboring heroically is one thing Gregory says he learned from his mentor, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago. It was in Chicago that Gregory served as priest and then auxiliary bishop before Pope John Paul II assigned him the Diocese of Belleville nearly 11 years ago. That was just three months before Archbishop Justin F. Rigali was picked to replace St. Louis Archbishop John L. May.

Faith and compassion

It is from the examples of Bernardin, who died of cancer in 1996, and the pope that Gregory derives his philosophy on human relationships. In 1993, a man accused Bernardin of sexual abuse.

Bernardin denied the allegations, and a year later the man recanted. Bernardin then visited his accuser as the man was dying of AIDS, forgiving him and saying Mass for him.

"That set the bar pretty high. It set the bar real high. Because, I think, he demonstrated how we are to treat people. Even people who try to harm us," said Gregory.

"I'm also drawn to that picture of Pope John Paul II, who went to the prison cell to visit the man who shot him. Both of those images of men of tremendous faith and compassion -- that's how we're supposed to treat each other."

For Gregory, this compassion has translated to dealing with children who were sexually abused by priests. Gregory has faced this situation at nearly every turn in his career. In Chicago, he had a front-row seat in the early 1990s as Bernardin crafted one of the American church's first official set of guidelines for responding to sexual abuse by priests.

When Gregory was sent to Belleville in 1994, he arrived in the midst of a sexual abuse scandal involving eight of the diocese's 110 priests. And then there was the national sexual abuse scandal that erupted just after he settled into the presidency -- what he calls "an unrelenting moment of crisis."

Gregory said that on this issue, he differs from some of his brother bishops.

"I do not feel that a cleric who has a credible incident of child abuse in his past can be returned to public ministry. I do not believe it. I didn't believe it when I arrived in the diocese, and I have less reason to believe it today," he said.

"Because parents must know that priests who are in service to them are not sources of threats to their children. This has nothing to do with forgiveness. It has nothing to do with the church stepping back from our Christ-given responsibility to be reconcilers. It has everything to do with the confidence people have to have in their ministers. I don't have the right to take a chance with your children."
Some bishops thought Gregory took this philosophy too far. They said the "zero tolerance" policy, adopted by the bishops at their Dallas meeting in 2002 in the document "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People," risked being unfair to priests.

Neuhaus said, "With zero tolerance, the mandate of the Holy Father was ignored. One strike you're out does long-term damage to the morale of priests and the understanding of the relationship between priests and their bishop. No priest with his head screwed on tight is going to talk to his bishop now."

Others say Gregory did not go far enough. David Clohessy, national director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, said he would give Gregory a "C+ for his genuine pastoral response to the problem."

"Admittedly, he was the president of the conference, not its king or tyrant, so he couldn't force his brother bishops to be compassionate," said Clohessy. "And yet it seems that post-Dallas, he really seemed to do very little to prod the conference toward genuine reform. Zero tolerance made it into the charter, but there was very little follow-up to make sure it was being implemented."

Clohessy points to an instance this year when Gregory decided to withhold the mental records of a former Belleville priest accused of child sexual abuse to protect the privacy rights of the priest -- an action for which Circuit Judge Lloyd A. Cueto fined the diocese and issued a contempt-of-court citation.

Gregory's appointment of former Oklahoma Gov. Frank Keating to the chairmanship of the church's national review board was another move some see as divisive. Last year, Keating said Los Angeles Cardinal Roger Mahony was not being responsive to the board's call for more information regarding sexual abuse by his priests. In doing so, Keating said some leaders of the church were acting "like La Cosa Nostra."

Keating later resigned.

Gregory said, "Early on it was clear to me in conversation with bishops, that whoever would be on the national review board would have to be individuals of national stature, who had faced difficult situations in the past, who had demonstrated real leadership capacity and who demonstrated a certain independence that would give credibility to the work the NRB did."

"Do I wish that I had had the luxury of more time to do a more careful screening and search so that more bishops could have been engaged in proposing candidates? Of course, and that's exactly what I did with the second group of candidates. But . . . this was Dallas . . . we had to take action."

"He made the right choices"

Time and precedent, according to Gregory, were the most significant factors in dealing with the sexual abuse scandal during his term. The body of bishops, he said, often lean on the past -- how the church has reacted to similar situations before -- when deciding how to respond to issues that affect the American church. Gregory said during his term he faced a problem without precedent.

"In the past, presidents of the conference have always had moments of difficulty. But usually there was an ebb and flow -- an issue would develop, it would be responded to, it would dissipate, then you would go to the next moment," he said. "My tenure included just intense, unrelenting conflicts that needed to be addressed without the benefit of a lot of precedent."

For the most part, though, Gregory's term is seen by both his champions and is critics as one of skillful diplomacy, media savvy and deft crisis management.

Chicago's Cardinal Francis George says, "When this all hit in 2002, you saw the mettle of the man. He rose to the challenge. That will be what is most remembered. We are on target because he made the right choices. The bishops are grateful to him for the work he has done."

Clohessy said Gregory's experience in dealing with sexual abuse by priests "helped his credibility on the national level," he said. "In that sense the bishops were extraordinarily lucky. Almost anyone else they could have gotten, at best they would have been inexperienced or at worst horribly compromised on the issue by virtue of their own track record."

Belleville is a diocese of about 110,000 Catholics with 124 parishes that stretch into the 28 southernmost counties of Southern Illinois. Gregory, 56, has made an impact on his priests there. The Rev. David Braun, pastor of St. Joseph in Stringtown, Ill., said that when he was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease a year ago, Gregory called him as soon as he heard and told the priest he would help him any way he could. Other diocesan priests described Gregory as "thoughtful," "compassionate," "a good listener" and "easy to work with."

With all those qualities going for him, a generally well-respected term as president, a high profile in Rome and a media-friendly star quality, some think Gregory is a natural to move up the ranks -- leaving Belleville, should the pope promote him, for a larger, metropolitan diocese. Some say Atlanta, where Archbishop John F. Donoghue, 76, has sent his resignation letter to Rome, would be ideal for Gregory.

"He'll be named within the next year to a major metropolitan diocese," said Chester Gillis, chairman of the theology department at Georgetown University.

Not everyone is so sure. "History's not on his side," said the Rev. Thomas Reese, editor of America magazine. "Most of the people who have been president of the bishops' conference have not been promoted afterward. His mentor, Cardinal Bernardin, was the only exception."

When Gregory was asked if he thought an appointment in Atlanta or another metropolitan archdiocese was in his future, he said, "I have never received a phone call from the pope that I said 'no' to."
By many accounts, Gregory has made good friends in Belleville and looks forward to reconnecting with the people of his diocese. "My son has an incredible ability to relate to people," said Gregory Sr. "He has become attached to a lot of people in that diocese, and I think there are a lot of people there who are attached to him."

The bishop said he was looking forward to more time with people and less time as an administrator.

"I have never enjoyed the administrative dimension of being bishop ... the part that I most enjoy is being with people -- events of worship and socialization, the teaching dimension, the personal encounter with people. I enjoy that much more, I look forward to that."

Gregory spent much of his time away from Belleville during the past three years, so for Catholics like Sister Joan Stovernick at St. Damian parish in Damiansville, Gregory's symbolic "return" to his diocese is something to be savored. "I'd like to see him stay here forever," she said.
Templeton Religion Reporter of the Year

History, fears fan flames of distrust
Parishioners want to ensure church stays open; archbishop wants to update control structure

Early Wednesday morning, Roger Krasnicki arrived in the parking lot of Fox affiliate KTVI (Channel 2). Dressed in a natty blue suit (complimented with a red "Save St. Stanislaus" button and yellow power tie), the 62-year-old retired lawyer did a smooth three-minute interview with the morning show's anchor and weatherman. The issue, at 7:48 that morning, was his church -- St. Stanislaus Kostka -- and the dispute between its board and the archbishop of St. Louis, Raymond Burke.

This was not Krasnicki's first time talking about the dispute on "Fox 2 in the Morning." As the church's unofficial spokesman he was calm, eloquent and, most importantly, telegenic. He had to be. Krasnicki knew Burke had done segments on KMOV (Channel 4) and KSDK (Channel 5) the previous two nights. The pressure to score a point for his side in the public relations game the church was playing with the archdiocese was intense. At one point Krasnicki showed photos of a Polish church in Wisconsin he said Burke closed and had torn down. When the interview was over, producer Patti McPhillips walked Krasnicki out of the studio to the parking lot. "Thanks, Roger," she said. "See you next time."

It was a telling remark, in that the battle for the soul of St. Stanislaus may continue for a while. But what, exactly, is at stake in this battle? What does each side want? Is it a case of the big, bad, greedy archbishop versus the helpless, innocent, immigrant church? Or is it a case of the spoiled, stubborn parish board versus the equitable, just archdiocese? Or is it really just about money and control on both sides?

Whatever it is, the argument has gotten ugly over the last two weeks. At the end of July, the church board sent a letter to its priest, the Rev. Philip J. Bene, informing him that they were taking financial control of the everyday life of the parish. In response, Burke temporarily removed Bene and St. Stanislaus' Polish priest, the Rev. Adam Hurbaczuk, and moved the weekly Polish Mass to another church about a mile away.

Last Sunday, the first since Burke's actions effectively ended the regular celebration of Mass at St. Stanislaus, a thousand people filled the church just northwest of downtown for a prayer service. Church leaders vowed to hold a similar service every Sunday until the dispute was resolved. Both sides subsequently launched PR offensives on local television news. The board put up a new Web site, www.saveststans.com. Burke sent a question-and-answer page titled "Facts About St. Stanislaus Parish" to every church in the archdiocese with the request that it run in their parish bulletins this weekend. He also wrote an open letter to the parishioners of St. Stanislaus that was published in last week's archdiocesan newspaper.

He also wrote an open letter to the parishioners of St. Stanislaus that was published in last week's archdiocesan newspaper.

Things were not always so antagonistic between the Polish community and the archdiocese. In the late 1870s, Archbishop Peter Richard Kenrick recognized the growing number of Poles in the city and granted a Polish Franciscan priest named Urban Stanowski permission to build a church for the community. In 1882, Stanowski became its pastor and in 1891 the cornerstone for the current building was blessed by the archdiocese. The same year, Kenrick agreed to a structure in which St. Stanislaus's laity would form a corporation to help govern the financial life of the church.

Burke said the authority laid out in the charter is clear. "The corporation was set up to operate as a Roman Catholic parish within the disciplines of the church," he said. "The property was ceded to the corporation therefore the property has to be administered according to the provisions of the corporation document."

The financial structure of St. Stanislaus would not have been unusual for an immigrant church in 19th century America when one of the Catholic Church's biggest problems was something called trusteeism. The American church was not well organized in the late 18th and early 19th century. So it was up to communities of Catholics to get together, raise enough money to buy some land and build a church, then find a priest to minister to them. Each parish was organized democratically. "The trustee system worked fairly well for a while," said Jay P. Dolan, emeritus professor of history at Notre Dame. "But then there were authority and control problems. The same issues you have in St. Louis today."

American bishops eventually decided they wanted better control, and in 1829, they put a stop to trusteeism. "But it continued on in some German and Polish churches for some time," said Dolan.

The situation with St. Stanislaus is seen by some as a lone holdout of the trustee system. "It's a little bit different... but it has a lot of the flavor of trusteeism," Burke said.

Regardless of the original intent of the charter, St. Stanislaus remained in control of its lay board for over a century. In the 1940s, '50s and '60s Cardinals Glennon and Ritter both sent letters to the pastor of the church and its
Templeton Religion Reporter of the Year

leadership requesting a change in its structure, but their requests were ignored and no one seriously pursued a change until Archbishop (now Cardinal) Justin Rigali in the summer of 2003.

Some members of the board believe the sexual abuse crisis that hit the church in 2002 was Rigali's motivation for suddenly taking an interest in St. Stanislaus and its property Burke calls that ridiculous.

"I cannot touch any parish funds to provide counseling for victims of abuse or to respond in any way to those cases. So the funds are inviolate," he said.

"Cardinal Rigali had been here a sufficient amount of time ... and he simply decided it was time to put everything in order. ... I can't touch the funds. I can't touch them."

But St. Stanislaus's board argues that if they allow their assets to be taken into the archdiocese's general fund, Burke will, in fact, be the only person who has control of their money and property.

In an effort to make sure that does not happen, the board has gone to the only man who can force Burke to back down. Krasnicki met with Pope John Paul II earlier this year, and the board has lodged an official complaint against Burke. Burke concedes his actions regarding St. Stanislaus are under investigation by the Vatican and says he did not make statements attributed to him on local television that he had the full support of Rome on this issue.

The archdiocese is not without its own recourse. According to several St. Stanislaus board members who were at a meeting in the summer of 2003, Monsignor Richard F. Stika, vicar general of the archdiocese, threatened the entire board with excommunication. "It was mindboggling," said John Baras, a board member who was there. Stika said his comments were taken out of context and that he was trying to explain the concept of obedience to one's bishop.

Burke said that although excommunication is always a possibility when Catholics publicly disobey the church, he is unlikely to use the penalty in the case of St. Stanislaus's board.

"I've never considered it because I've believed all along that these are good people and they will act as Catholics, respect the archbishop in a matter which is completely fundamental to church life," he said.

Each week at St. Stanislaus, parishioners put cash or checks into green envelopes marked "restoration." This money is for the maintenance of the church, and it is this fund that is often mentioned as the $1.5 million St. Stanislaus has in assets.

Parishioners also can contribute to the regular, weekly collection which goes into an account the church uses to pay everyday bills. In most Catholic churches the pastor holds this account and is responsible for its use. For the past 50 years or so, according to Krasnicki, this has been true at St. Stanislaus. And it is this account that the board seized from Bene's control at the end of July, precipitating Burke's removal of both St. Stanislaus priests.

If the two sides do not come to an agreement, one possible scenario would be schism. Krasnicki says the board has been contacted by the Polish National Catholic Church, an ethnic Christian church that says it can trace its lineage back to the apostles, but does not organize itself under the pope. He said it is "possible" that if there is no reconciliation, St. Stanislaus could leave the Roman Catholic church and join this Polish church.

A more likely scenario is that the members of St. Stanislaus will simply remain Roman Catholic and attend other parishes, keeping St. Stanislaus as a community center.

"That's always something to be feared," said Burke. "And I will do everything in my power to make sure the parish does not go into schism. But I can't compromise the whole nature of the church in order to prevent that."

The board seems equally resolved, and yet there are hints from both sides that an arrangement could be near. "We're not going to totally knuckle under," said Krasnicki. "But there could be a compromise if he agreed to a legally enforceable assurance that he would not close us down."

Burke has repeatedly lated that he would write a letter agreeing to something along those lines.

But an agreement may come down to a negotiation of semantics. Burke says he will not close St. Stanislaus as long as there is "an active parish community and support for the parish." The board says it does not want Burke to be able to define what makes their community "active."

The devil will be in the details.