

BishopAccountability.org

Bishop's Apology Fails to Salve Victim's Anguish

Albany Randy Sweringen, Who Accused Former Rpi Chaplain of Misconduct, Wants Hubbard to Step down

By Michele Morgan Bolton
Times Union (Albany, NY)
April 22, 2004

A 38-year-old former monk fought tears of anguish and gratitude Wednesday, a day after receiving a personal apology from the leader of the Albany Roman Catholic Diocese for having been victimized as a teenage student by his college chaplain.

Randy Sweringen said he met Tuesday with Bishop Howard Hubbard who condemned the Rev. Charles Celeste's sexual misconduct and abuse of trust.

Celeste was the man's spiritual confessor at RPI from 1984 to '87.

Sweringen said the bishop's words were healing, but he believes Hubbard should step aside so new leadership can handle the sexual abuse crisis.

"He has spent years trying to do what is right and good, yet has made some grave mistakes ... both in his personal life and with the priests under his care," Sweringen said. "He is no longer a credible leader."

Hubbard denied allegations in February that he had sex with a young man in the 1970s who later killed himself. He said it would be wrong to dignify a false charge by walking away from his post.

Days later, a man said that when he was a teenage prostitute around the same time, the bishop solicited sex from him in Washington Park.

Hubbard called those charges false, too.

On Wednesday, the diocese issued a brief statement in response to Sweringen: "We listened. We tried to help. Healing is our mission and we'll keep trying to fulfill that mission."

Hubbard has met on dozens of occasions with victims who were sexually abused by priests, and the diocese must follow church policy, which calls for zero tolerance, removing priests from ministry if they have sexually abused any child.

Sweringen made his complaint against Celeste public in August. At that time, the priest was pastor at Holy Family parish in Little Falls. He took a voluntary leave of absence after admitting he had sexual relations with the 18-year-old student and another male.

On Wednesday, Sweringen wore a purple ribbon pinned upside down on his lapel so the ends formed a "V" for victim.

He spoke of the pain he felt when he drove into the Pastoral Center's parking lot for his meeting and spotted a large sign reading, "We back our bishop," framed in a window. Inside the building, he said, smaller, lavender posters of support were tacked onto bulletin boards and employees wore purple ribbons of solidarity.

"I began to cry," Sweringen said. "I walked down that hall afraid to look people in the eye. The bishop is not the victim here. He holds the power."

In a message to members of the Albany Diocese about its treatment of victims of clergy abuse, Sweringen said: "We are your brothers and sisters in Christ. Your fathers and grandmothers. We live among you. But most are still suffering in silence. I think Jesus would not wear a ribbon signifying 'We back our bishop.' "

At the Crowne Plaza on Wednesday, Sweringen was accompanied by his partner Michael Mansfield. He sat surrounded by photos of younger, happier days.

In one image, he mugged for the camera with friends on a trip to Maine's Yarmouth Clown Festival in 1983, a year before the abuse started.

In another picture, the radiant man draped in hooded white robes clasped hands fervently with Pope John Paul II.

At times, he had to stop speaking to control his emotions.

Wednesday's news conference, which was arranged by attorney John Aretakis, was an event that Sweringen said he would never have imagined.

After having studied to be a Benedictine monk, he left the order in 2001 and is director of alumni and church relations for Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, Calif.

"Why did I have to wait so long?" he asked about the bishop's apology. "Why wasn't his team working together and sending that message months ago?"

Sweringen said he was told in last August there would be no investigation because Celeste had admitted his behavior. In December, church attorney Michael L. Costello wrote to Aretakis and said a inquiry was being opened and Sweringen would talk with investigator Thomas Martin.

"I was forced to tell my story another time, to another stranger hired by the church," Sweringen said, adding that Martin poured salt on his wounds when he began the interview by saying he knew nothing about the case.

Sweringen said his employers had written to the diocese inquiring about the situation and received a letter back in December from the Rev. Kenneth Doyle, saying the bishop had asked him to reply that the review board "investigated the complaint and concluded that the relationship involved consenting adults, each of whom was capable of making informed and responsible decisions."

But Sweringen said that both Hubbard and victims advocate Theresa Rodrigues, with whom he also met Tuesday, "told me they had never seen the letter and that they disagreed" with that statement.

Although he received the apology he needed, Sweringen said full reconciliation requires a willingness to make amends and an ardent desire to change one's ways.

"Bishop Hubbard told me that zero tolerance is not for people 18 or older," he said. "They must meet us with equal effort and desire for reconciliation if it ever is to occur ... so we can all grow and find a just and loving way through this crisis."