

241-0

The New York Times

NEW YORK, SATURDAY, MAY 25, 2002

Vatican Accepts Resignation Of Milwaukee's Archbishop

By LAURIE GOODSTEIN

The Vatican yesterday accepted the resignation of Archbishop Rembert G. Weakland of Milwaukee, who acknowledged on Thursday that he had paid \$450,000 to settle a claim that he sexually assaulted a man two decades ago.

Supporters of the archbishop, who often challenged Vatican traditionalists on abortion, sexuality and the role of women, said they were saddened that his tenure had ended in disgrace. His critics, on the other hand, were hopeful that his successor would be more attuned to orthodoxy.

Archbishop Weakland, now 75, was one of the few remaining bishops appointed before Pope John Paul II's reign who challenged the Curia repeatedly. In 25 years as archbishop of Milwaukee, he placed women in positions of authority in the church, criticized militants in the anti-abortion movement and testified in favor of gay rights. He is the author or co-author of more than a dozen books, on topics like Catholic social teaching, the church since the Second Vatican Council, prayer and Catholic education.

In the 1980's, he had the stature to lead the American bishops in the drafting of their landmark pastoral letter on the economy, which called for reordering the nation's priorities to reduce poverty and inequality, reform the welfare system and assist organized labor. But his national influence waned in recent years as the conference of American bishops grew more conservative.

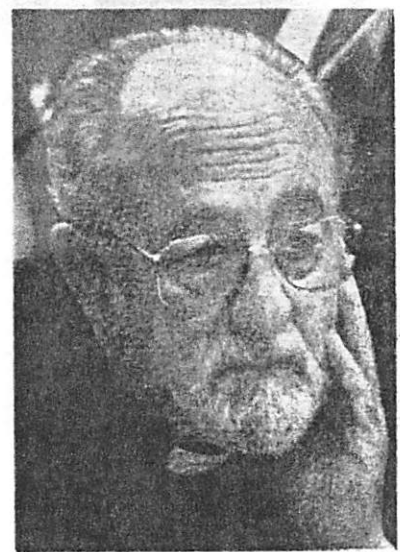
"Over the years he has been a pretty inspiring person to progressive Catholics, because he certainly

has been an advocate for inclusion of the laity, a greater role for women in the church and for married clergy," said Sister Maureen Fiedler, a founder of the Women's Ordination Conference. "I grieve for him today, and I feel really sad that this has happened."

Archbishop Weakland, who has denied the accusation of sexual assault but has not addressed the question of whether he had a sexual relationship with his accuser, said through a spokesman yesterday that he would issue a public apology in the future.

He previously welcomed the attention of the news media, and in 1991 he

Continued on Page A12



Reuters

Archbishop Rembert G. Weakland challenged traditionalists.

1 /

Rome Accepts Resignation Of Milwaukee Archbishop

Continued From Page A1

was the subject of a two-part profile in *The New Yorker* in which he talked about the issue of celibacy and his struggle to control infatuations with women, saying, "I'm falling in love all the time."

"I have to be on guard not to let my emotions run away," he said then, "not to make excuses to see someone who has set off the spark. So far, I've done pretty well."

In interviews yesterday, some of the archbishop's admirers, and detractors as well, speculated that this scandal was not a case of sexual assault but more likely a consensual homosexual relationship that ended badly. They said they were bothered more by the \$450,000 settlement than by the appearance that the archbishop had strayed sexually.

Even his critics — and they are many — who maintain that he spent his career undermining church teaching, said they felt pity for him. An anguished letter that he wrote to his accuser in 1980 was made public on Thursday, and in it he said his mother had always warned him "not to put down on paper what I would not want the whole world to read."

"It must be devastating for him to have a private letter that he paid nearly half a million dollars to be suppressed to be banded about in public," said Helen Hull Hitchcock, director of Women for Faith and Family, a conservative Catholic organization. "Too bad he didn't mind his mama."

With the Vatican's speedy accept-



Auxiliary Bishop Richard J. Sklba will lead the archdiocese until a successor is named.

ance of Archbishop Weakland's retirement, his duties are being assumed for now by Richard J. Sklba (pronounced SKILL-ba), an auxiliary bishop in the archdiocese.

It is not known when a new archbishop will be named. The process starts with the pope's representative in Washington, who will forward the names of three candidates to the Congregation for Bishops in Rome. That Vatican department sends its choice, usually but not always from among those three, to the pope, who makes the ultimate decision.

Archbishop Weakland was born in Patton, Pa., near Altoona, on April 2, 1927. He became a Benedictine monk at St. Vincent Archabbey in Latrobe, Pa., in 1949. Two years later he was ordained a priest.

"He's an intellectual," said a friend of his, the Rev. Andrew Greeley, a priest and author in Chicago. "He speaks 18 or 19 languages, he's a trained musician, so he's a man of some stature. He impresses people."

He initially intended to teach music in the Benedictine order, and studied in Europe and at the Juilliard School. At Columbia University, he began a graduate thesis on Ambrosian chant. He did not take it up again until 1996, however, when as archbishop he took a sabbatical and returned to Columbia to finish his research.

Instead of pursuing music, he showed a talent for leadership and rose to become first the abbot at St. Vincent and ultimately, in 1967, the abbot primate, or worldwide leader, of the International Benedictine Confederation. As primate, he was based in the Vatican for 10 years.

Mrs. Hitchcock, a critic of the archbishop, said she understood he had been a thorn in the side of some at the Vatican, and eventually Pope Paul VI decided to name him an archbishop back in his native country.

"They stuck him in what was, from the Italian perspective, a remote region of the United States," Mrs. Hitchcock said.

The Milwaukee Archdiocese today is home to more than 680,000 Catholics, 234 parishes and 255 active diocesan priests.

Archbishop Weakland was popular among his priests, granting most of them unusual autonomy in their parishes. He was an early advocate of allowing girls to be altar servers, and in the 1980's he held "listening sessions" that allowed women to air their views on abortion and birth control.

That episode prompted the Vatican in 1990 to forbid the University of Fribourg in Switzerland, affiliated



Photographs by Reuters

Archbishop Rembert G. Weakland blessed worshipers at Mass last week at St. John's Cathedral in Milwaukee. Yesterday, he resigned.

with the Dominican order, to grant him an honorary doctorate.

He often tangled with traditionalists in his archdiocese. The Milwaukee chapter of Catholics United for the Faith, with 700 members, recently campaigned against his plan to renovate the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist. The plan involved redesign of the worship space to de-emphasize the hierarchical aspects of the liturgy.

"It is dangerous to send your child to a Catholic high school or a Catholic grade school in this archdiocese," Al Szew, president of the Milwaukee chapter of Catholics United, said yesterday, "because they don't teach Catholicism. Pop psychology has replaced theology, and unfortunately you end up with individuals who are Catholic nominally but don't understand their faith. And that is the legacy of Archbishop Weakland."

In recent months, Archbishop Weakland was criticized for refusing to identify priests who had been accused of sexual abuse but found by the archdiocese not to be a threat. Victims' groups said that in the past,

he had made remarks that showed he did not understand the damage that sexual abuse can cause minors.

In 1988, for instance, he told one newspaper, *The Milwaukee Catholic*: "Not all adolescent victims are so innocent. Some can be sexually very active and aggressive and often quite streetwise. We frequently try such adolescents for crimes as adults at that age."

But Joe W. Zopp, a lay chaplain with Dignity, an organization of gay Catholics, said yesterday that in Archbishop Weakland the group had found a "loving, caring shepherd who has allowed us to do what we need to do to experience God."

The circumstances of his resignation, Mr. Zopp said, "doesn't change our view of him, and maybe it's because of his own weaknesses that he was able to be forgiving and helpful to other people who have had failings."

"Maybe he's been less judgmental because he knows that he himself was a human being."