

Gay bishop causes stir by criticizing pope: Robinson says frustrated Catholics can find home in Episcopal Church

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An openly gay Episcopal bishop has caused a stir among Catholics for criticizing Pope Benedict XVI and suggesting that frustrated Catholics could find a new home in the badly divided Episcopal Church.

Bishop V. Gene Robinson of New Hampshire, whose election in 2003 threatens to split the Episcopal Church and the worldwide Anglican Communion, denied accusations that he was trying to lure Catholics out of their churches.

"We are seeing so many Roman Catholics joining the [Episcopal] Church," Robinson said November 6 at London's St. Martin-in-the-Fields Church in Trafalgar Square. "Pope Ratzinger may be the best thing that ever happened to the Episcopal Church."

In an interview, Robinson said many Catholics who could no longer "hang in there" joined the Episcopal Church after they "threw up their hands" when the conservative new pope was elected last spring.

Sunday's salvo was not the first time the two men had clashed swords from afar. After Robinson's election in 2003, Benedict—then known as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger—sent an unusual message of "fraternal regard" to Robinson's opponents who were meeting in Dallas.

"I hasten to assure you of my heartfelt prayers for all those taking part in this convocation," Ratzinger said at the time, adding that "there is a unity in truth and a communion of grace which transcend the borders of any nation."

Reached November 7 during a layover at the Philadelphia airport, Robinson stood by his comments but insisted his critique was directed not at the church but at

conservatives who say homosexuals were the cause of the Catholics' sexual abuse scandal.

"To link homosexuality and pedophilia is a completely discredited notion but a myth that the Roman Catholic Church is playing on," Robinson said. "And that does an enormous disservice to gay and lesbian people."

Some Catholics, meanwhile, urged Robinson to focus on problems in his own church rather than meddle in Catholic disputes. Bill Donohue, president of the conservative Catholic League, called Robinson a "walking embarrassment to Episcopalians everywhere."

The backdrop for Robinson's comments is a pending Vatican document that is expected to place limits on the admission of gay men to seminaries and the priesthood in the wake of the sex-abuse crisis among priests. Robinson said linking homosexuality and child abuse is "an act of violence" and "vile."

At the same time, anecdotal reports indicate that the crisis caused by Robinson's election has prompted more than a few Episcopalians to leave their church to seek refuge in the order and discipline of the Catholic Church. "It is because of people like him—a practicing homosexual—that his church is imploding," Donohue said. - *Religion News Service*