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Diocesan sexual abuse audits materially insufficient

by Tom Gallagher

NCR Today

Finally, a thoughtful and articulate priest-diocesan official criticizes diocesan sexual abuse audits and the U.S. bishops conference staffer agrees that the weakness in the audits is a legitimate issue. Why has it taken so long for this to come out?

Archdiocese official argues that safeguard audits are insufficient

"Catholic dioceses in Wisconsin and across the country often tout their annual audits by the U.S. Conference of Bishops as proof that they are protecting children from sexual abuse by clergy.

The audits ensure a diocese has in place such safety measures as training, a code of conduct, background checks and a child sex abuse review board, all required by the so-called Dallas Charter, a 2002 document drafted by the bishops conference in response to the clergy sex abuse scandal.

But a canon lawyer and vice chancellor in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee alleged this week that the audits are insufficient, saying parameters the bishops conference imposed limit their scope in a way that could endanger children.

"I'm very disappointed," said Father James Connell, who noted that the audits cover only compliance with the Dallas Charter and not the Vatican's essential norms that dictate the procedures for reviewing sex-abuse cases involving children.

The danger, he said, is that priests could be returned to ministry who should not be.

"People in the pews expect that the audit covers everything, and it doesn't," said Connell, a

Sheboygan priest who last week issued an open letter to Catholics nationally, accusing the La?Crosse Diocese of violating canon law in the way it vets child-abuse claims.

I'm told that NCR editor at large Tom Roberts is working on a profile of Fr. James Connell. Check back later for that.

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