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Bishops at center of abuse scandal, and potential reform

Daniel Burke Religion News Service | May. 18, 2011

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Bishop Blase J. Cupich of Spokane, Wash., chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on the Protection of Children and Young People, speaks during a press conference to release the results of the John Jay report at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops he adquarters in Washington May 18.(CNS photo/Bob Roller)

WASHINGTON -- A sweeping new report on the clergy sex abuse scandal compares the Roman Catholic Church to police departments, with similar hierarchies, moral authority and isolated working environments.

And because the church, like the police, has "historically 'policed itself,'" as the report says, some lay Catholics and victims' advocates say even a stack of damning reports will not change a church that has been historically resistant to reform.

A recent grand jury report that found dozens of accused priests still in active ministry in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, critics say, gives them little evidence for hope.

The study by New York?s John Jay College of Criminal Justice, released Wednesday, portrays the abuse scandal as largely confined to the past. More than 90 percent of nearly 10,700 allegations against Catholic priests occurred before 1990, according to the report.

Researchers said the abuse of minors correlated to a jump in deviant behavior in society at large, such as premarital sex, experimental drug use and crime.

"The problem of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic priests in the United States is largely historical," said Karen Terry, the principle investigator for the study, "and the bulk of the cases occurred decades ago."

The ongoing crisis in Philadelphia -- which even church bishops were at a loss to explain -- shows the scandal will continue unless bishops are held accountable for their actions, according to victims' advocates.

New, non-mandatory guidelines issued by the Vatican on Monday also give little indication such oversight is forthcoming. Only one U.S. bishop, Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston, has been forced to resign for failing to prevent the sexual abuse of children.

Over the 60 years covered by the study, bishops? response to abusive priests "changed substantively," according to the John Jay report. "For example, abusive priests were less likely to be returned to active ministry and/or more likely to be placed on administrative leave during the later years," the report states.

The report said bishops, like many Americans during the 1950-1980s, failed to understand the harm resulting from sexual abuse. Researchers, however, did not give the bishops a pass.

"Although this lack of understanding was consistent with the overall lack of understanding of victimization at the time, the absence of acknowledgement of harm was a significant ethical lapse on the part of leadership in some dioceses," the report states.

Under get-tough reforms adopted by the bishops in 2002, credible accusations of abuse are supposed to be reported to civil authorities, and dioceses are to be audited annually. But neither policy is mandatory.

The John Jay report found that bishops reported just 14 percent of accusations against priests to the police. And two bishops refuse to allow the audits in their dioceses.

In January, Pope Benedict XVI promoted one of the two hold-out bishops, the Most Rev. Robert Vasa from Baker, Ore. to a larger diocese, in Santa Rosa, Calif.

"What kind of message does that send?" said Nicolas Cafardi, a canon law professor and former chairman of the bishops committee that drafted the abuse guidelines.

The Philadelphia grand jury report alleged that church officials kept 37 priests in active ministry, despite credible accusations of sexual abuse. The archdiocese later suspended 26 priests and has mounted an internal investigation.

In a May 12 essay in *Commonweal* magazine, Ana Maria Catanzaro, who heads the Archdiocese of Philadelphia?s sexual-abuse review board, accused Cardinal Justin Rigali and his subordinates of failing "miserably at being open and transparent."

"If Philadelphia?s bishops had followed their call to live the gospel, they would have acted differently," Catanzaro said.

No bishops have called for leaders in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia to be held accountable by church or civil authorities.

"I thought the silence on the part of the bishops was deafening," Cafardi said. "Without bishops willing to call their brother bishops out and say, 'You?re not keeping the rules,'" the guidelines lose their moral force, he said.

Speaking to reporters in Washington after the release of the John Jay report, Bishop Blase Cupich of Spokane, Wash., who chairs the bishops? child protection committee, said, "We just won?t know what happened in Philadelphia" until the archdiocese completes its investigation.

"I can tell you from talking to bishops around the country that they were very surprised that this happened," Cupich said.

The bishops plan to review implementation of their child protection guidelines at a meeting in June in Seattle. Advocates for reform are skeptical much will change.

"The church is an institution that is very resistant to change," said Terence McKiernan, president of the watchdog website BishopAccountability.org [1]. "These are not moves to fix things, but to make the church look good."

Editor's Note: The full text of the John Jay report is now available as a pdf file: **Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950-2010** [2]

For more coverage of the John Jay report, see:

- **Bishops at center of abuse scandal, and potential reform** **[3]**, RNS, May 18
- **Report spreads blame for Catholic sex abuse** [4], RNS, May 17
- **Diocesan programs help build 'safety barriers' against child abusers** [5], CNS, May 18 2011
- **No room for complacency in protecting children from abuse, bishop says** [6], CNS, May 18 2011
- **US bishops say new John Jay report on abuse key to understanding issue** [7], CNS, May 18 2011
- **Key quotes from National Review Board's 'causes and context' report** [8], CNS, May 17 2011
- **Key events in US church response to clergy sex abuse crisis** [9], CNS, May 17 2011
- **Bishops' child protection officer looks to church's next steps on abuse** [10], CNS, May 17 2011
- **Misperceptions of abuse problem common, John Jay report says** [11], CNS, May 17 2011
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