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Bishop: I didn't read letter warning of priest's behavior

Joshua J. McElwee | May. 27, 2011

Bishop Finn address the media May 27. (NCR photo/Zoe Ryan)

KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- Bishop Robert W. Finn said today he had not seen a year-old letter from a Catholic elementary school principal warning of the odd behavior of a local priest who was arrested May 19 for possessing child pornography.

Finn said he only saw the letter from principal Julie Hess yesterday.

Hess delivered the letter to the diocesan vicar general in May 2010 -- exactly one year before the arrest of Fr. Shawn Ratigan and seven months before the diocese removed him from his parish.

At a press conference called for 3 p.m. today, Finn said he was given a ?brief verbal summary? of the letter by Murphy a year ago, that he had read it in its entirety for the ?first time? last night (May 26), and that, ?to the best of his knowledge,? no one other than the vicar general had read the letter before yesterday.

Finn said: ?Hindsight makes it clear that I should have requested from Msgr. Murphy an actual copy of the report.? Read yesterday's NCR story: **Diocese was warned of priest's aberrant behavior one year before arrest** [1]

Hess is principal of St. Patrick School in Kansas City, Mo. The school is attached to the parish that Ratigan served as pastor.

In the 2010 letter, Hess outlines a series of incidents reported to her by members of the school?s faculty and students? parents that raised concerns. They include:

- Ratigan allowing students to "climb on him, grab his leg/s, and reach into his pockets for candy."
- The fact that ?Father takes hundreds of pictures of the kids, not just during special events, but on field trips and in their everyday school activities.? Hess continues: ?A few parents have mentioned that they think it?s strange and wonder what he does with all the pictures.?
- A Brownie Girl Scout visit to Ratigan?s house where parents reported ?they were somewhat disturbed with the inside of Father?s home.? Inside they saw ?a giant stuffed animal on the bed in the guestroom

> and the kitchen hand towels are shaped to look like doll clothes.? Earlier in the day, Hess writes, a woman ?had found a pair of girls? panties inside one of the planters in Father?s back yard.?

Asked at the press conference what he thought of the letter upon reading it, Finn said he was ?flabbergasted at the multitude of inappropriate behaviors? and ?felt great shame.?

As to whether the inaction of the diocese showed that decision makers in the chancery were not following their mandated training to identify potential warning signs for sex abuse, Finn replied: ?I think that?s a question we have to ask ourselves. If that was the case and why.?

And to whether he is considering resignation, said Finn: ?I am looking forward to the future and how we can keep the commitments that we?ve made.?

The full text of Bishop Finn's statement is **here** [2].

Ratigan was arrested May 19 on three counts of possessing child pornography. He was arraigned May 23 in Clay County court, and he pleaded not guilty to the charges. He is scheduled to appear in court again June 16.

In a statement the diocese released May 20, the diocese said that it had sent Ratigan "out of state" for psychiatric care after a suicide attempt -- emergency workers found him Dec. 17 unconscious in his closed garage with his motorcycle running.

When the priest returned to the diocese, Finn said in the letter, Ratigan was sent to a community of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Holy Eucharist with instructions to not attend or participate in events where children were present. Finn also said the priest "did not have his computer or his camera in his possession during this period."

Records obtained by NCR indicate Ratigan accessed his Facebook account as late as March 9, and posted several status updates that day using his cell phone.

After the diocese became aware that Ratigan had attended several functions involving children, Finn said in the letter that the diocesan vicar general contacted the police again May 12.

Following an investigation, police officers found more pornographic materials of children -- including "up-skirt pictures that were covertly taken," as well as a nude photo of a minor female.

According to court documents, detectives determined May 13 that many of the images "were taken in and around the churches and schools Ratigan has been associated with."

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