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Bishops to take second look at abuse reforms

by Daniel Burke by Religion News Service

A review of church sex abuse guidelines will top the agenda when the nation's Roman Catholic bishops meet in Seattle next week (June 15-17). But no major changes have been proposed, according to church leaders, even after several recent reports have raised questions about the rules' power to remove abusive priests.

The stakes at the Seattle meeting will be high, as the bishops struggle to recover their moral authority and end the worst crisis in modern church history.

The U.S. church has spent more than \$2 billion on sex abuse settlements, "safe environment" training for staff, and two sweeping studies that sought to explain the causes and context of a scandal that has claimed 15,700 victims since 1950.

The Seattle assembly will also provide a leadership test for Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York, who will guide nearly 200 U.S. bishops in his first meeting as president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

In addition to reviewing the sexual abuse guidelines, the bishops will vote on a document that denounces physician-assisted suicide and hear a report on Anglicans who wish to convert to Catholicism using a new church structure.

The sex abuse guidelines, however, are expected to dominate public sessions and private conversations during the three-day meeting.

Even as the bishops attempt to move past the scandal, advocates for victims of sexual abuse and some lay Catholics say recent reports of lapses by bishops in Pennsylvania, Missouri and New Mexico prove that serious gaps mar church rules.

"In three dioceses now, there appear to be loopholes that are being exploited by bishops who appear to be gaming the system," said Nicholas Cafardi, a leading expert on canon law and former adviser to the bishops.

Cafardi and others hope the bishops close those loopholes in Seattle, but a draft proposal provided by the bishops' conference contains no such revisions.

In Philadelphia, a grand jury report released in February accused church officials of keeping 37 priests in active ministry, despite accusations of improper sexual acts with minors. The archdiocese later suspended 26 priests and has mounted an internal investigation.

Kansas City Bishop Robert Finn has apologized for failing to remove a priest from ministry despite a warning from church officials. The priest was arrested in May on child pornography charges. The diocese appointed a former U.S. attorney on Thursday to investigate its sexual abuse policies.

In Gallup, N.M., a lay review board has never met with Bishop James S. Wall during his two years in the diocese, according to the Gallup Independent, a local newspaper.

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Together, the U.S. bishops passed two sets of guidelines in 2002, as the clergy sexual abuse scandal erupted in Boston and spread to nearly every diocese in the country.

The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People is essentially a set of promises from the bishops to their church. The "Essential Norms" for dealing with allegations of sexual abuse of minors by clergy are Vatican-approved rules that have the force of church law.

Neither requires substantial revisions at this time, said Bishop Blase Cupich of Spokane, Wash., chairman of the bishops' Committee on the Protection of Children and Young People.

"The charter is working," Cupich said. "We had seven (sexual abuse) allegations that were deemed credible in 2010, out of a church of 65 million Catholics. I think it's working."

Cupich also said it would be rash to revise church rules before the internal investigation in Philadelphia is complete.

"The charter has an iconic status for us. We want to protect its integrity. We are going to be very slow in changing it without having the full picture in a given situation," the bishop said.

Cafardi agreed that the charter and norms have been effective.

"I think they have done a wonderful service to the church in greatly reducing the number of instances of child sexual abuse by priests," he said. "But we know by instances in three dioceses that there are some gaps that it would not hurt to close."

According to a draft of proposed revisions that will be debated in Seattle, the bishops plan to change the policies to bring them into accord with Vatican norms issued in 2010. Those norms equate abusing persons with mental disabilities with child abuse, and make the acquisition, possession, or distribution of child pornography a church crime.

Victims' advocates and canon law experts say the bishops should go further, arguing that church rules will remain ineffective unless they contain penalties for breaking them.

"This isn't a real set of laws, these are procedures that are honored more in the breach than in the observance," said Terence McKiernan, president of BishopAccountability.org, a watchdog website.

"If I was a bishop, I would treat Philadelphia as an alarm. This is one of the largest, most significant dioceses in the country, which clearly ignored the policy," he said.

Church rules also suggest that bishops report all abuse accusations to diocesan review boards composed of lay Catholics. Board members in Philadelphia and Kansas City have said they did not learn of accusations until they were published in the media.

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