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Bishops squandered opportunity, victims' group says

Dan Morris-Young | Jun. 17, 2011

Bishop Blase J. Cupich of Spokane, Wash., chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on the Protection of Children and Young People, speaks during the opening session of the bishops' annual spring meeting near Seattle in Bellevue, Wash., June 15. (CNS photo /Stephen Brashear)

BELLEVUE, WASH. -- "This is a squandered opportunity and a disaster for children, not only in the United States but worldwide," a clergy sex abuse advocacy group said in response to the U.S. bishops' vote to approve only minor changes to their charter for child and youth protection.

The U.S. bishops overwhelmingly voted June 16 to adopt a revised Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People at their semiannual meeting.

And while it seemed clear the bishops and their officers are aware of divergent voices within the American Catholic community and the harsh light shed on clergy sexual abuse by recent revelations of lapses in the charter in Philadelphia and in Kansas City, Mo., the revisions they approved were little more than date and number updates and language tweaks for clarity.

"The U.S. bishops had the opportunity to learn from Philadelphia and Kansas City, and to craft a revised policy that would have been a challenge to the Vatican to move further, and a model for [Pope] Benedict [XVI]'s global initiative," the statement from BishopAccountability.org said. "Instead, as they have so many times in the past, they ignored the problems and pretended that the system was working well. It is not."

In asking fellow bishops to approve the revisions, Bishop Blase J. Cupich of Spokane, Wash., said, "The charter has served the church well."

Cupich, chairman of the bishops' Committee for the Protection of Children and Young People, urged the bishops to accept the revisions, saying, "It is a helpful tool as we keep our pledge to protect children, promote healing and rebuild trust." This would be the second revision to the charter since it was first approved in 2002.

The bishops approved the revisions with 187 yes votes, 5 noes and 4 abstentions.

One indication of the bishops' intent was the rejection of more than two-dozen suggested charter changes by

Bishop Fabian Bruskewitz of Lincoln, Neb., that would have diluted requirements in several places.

Bruskewitz has a long history of resisting the charter requirements and does not participate in the charter's mandated diocesan audits of sex abuse policies.

A modification to the revised document offered by Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston seemed to respond to criticisms that the bishops had not held themselves to the same standard of reporting sexual abuse by a prelate as by deacons or priests.

He asked that the charter include that "notification also be given to law enforcement authorities when the apostolic nuncio is advised of any accusations against a bishop involving sexual abuse of a minor."

The child protection committee incorporated O'Malley's requested change in the final section of the charter titled "A Statement of Episcopal Commitment."

While the suggested change does not call for mandatory reporting of any allegation of sexual abuse by a bishop, it does add the words "and comply with applicable civil laws" to the end of a sentence that reads:

"If another bishop becomes aware of the sexual abuse of a minor by another bishop or of an allegation of sexual abuse of a minor by a bishop, he too is obliged to inform the apostolic nuncio."

Advocates for clergy sex abuse victims had hoped that the bishops would use this opportunity to add more teeth to the charter and its accompanying "Essential Norms for Diocesan/Eparchial Policies Dealing with Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests or Deacons."

However, most of the changes to the charter under consideration involved bringing it into conformity with instructions the Vatican issued in May calling for a global response to the crisis of sexual abuse of minors by priests.

Alluding to the O'Malley modification as well as to sections that added child pornography as an area of abuse and redefined youth as 18 and under, rather than 14, Honolulu Bishop Larry Silva said, "I see the passage as saying we are still very committed to trying to do all we can to protect children and that all the components to do that remain in order."

In a press release the day before the bishops' meeting, BishopAccountability.org called for these changes to the charter:

- Mandatory reporting of all allegations of sexual abuse to diocesan review boards, "not just the ones that the bishop selects";
- Requiring "bishops and their officials" to "report all allegations, without exception, to civil authorities";
- Beefing up "zero tolerance" by demanding bishops "immediately remove priests who are accused of abuse," arguing that "currently, accused priests can continue to minister for months or even years at the discretion of the bishop";
- Reinstatement of appellate review boards so abuse survivors would "be able to appeal a review board decision";
- Tightening confidentiality agreement language to address situations where it appeared "that survivors are still being coerced into signing" them;
- Develop a "strict code of conduct" for victim's assistance coordinators in wake of evidence of "betrayal of survivors ? recently revealed in Philadelphia and Cleveland";
- Specifying that "any bishop who abuses a child or enables the abuse of a child, or has done so in the past"

be reported to civil authorities, not the papal nuncio as the bishops' revisions propose.

O'Malley's revision would seemingly address at least part of BishopAccountability.org's last point.

Teresa M. Kettelkamp, who heads the bishops' Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection, told NCR that the charter seeks to be as forceful as possible while respecting ordinaries' authority and autonomy.

Asked about critiques from the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, BishopAccountability.org and others that bishops are not required to share all cases of alleged clerical sexual abuse with their diocesan review boards, Kettelkamp said, "I think it is the expectation of the charter and the [National] Review Board" that local review boards are made aware of all allegations of sexual abuse of minors by priests or deacons.

An "elephant in the room," she continued, are cases "that appear that they are boundary violations or violations of a code of conduct."

While the charter does not mandate reporting all such cases, Kettelkamp stressed that her recommendation to dioceses is that such cases be brought to the attention of review boards.

"Once you start to triage" which cases should or should not be provided review boards, she said, "you are on a slippery slope."

She also said that this would not be last revision to the charter. "We want this to be a living document" open to change and adaptation to advances in research "and reflect the ongoing environment."

[Dan Morris-Young is an NCR West Coast correspondent.]

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