NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

After indictment, KC Catholics wonder what's next

Joshua J. McElwee | Oct. 21, 2011
Kansas City, Mo.

A mix of disappointment, anger and a deep sense of uncertainty settled in among Catholics here in the wake of the Oct. 14 announcement that a local prosecutor had indicted their bishop, Robert W. Finn, along with their diocese for failing to protect area children.

The indictments were the first of their kind in the quarter-century-long clergy sex abuse scandal.

From the diocesan chancery to parishes throughout the area, Catholics seemed to be holding their breath -- trying to determine what would happen next and how the legal proceedings would affect their bishop, other church leaders and even life in their parishes.

The indictments stem from the case of a local priest who had been charged for possession of child pornography. A technician found images of naked children on the computer of Fr. Shawn Ratigan in December last year. The Kansas City-St. Joseph diocese learned about the images and Finn removed Ratigan from his parish, but did not report the incident to civil authorities until May.

In a news conference announcing the charges, Jackson County, Mo., prosecutor Jean Peters Baker emphasized they were about ?protecting children? and had ?nothing to do with the Catholic faith? in general, and confirmed that Finn and the diocese had been the subject of a Jackson County grand jury investigation for several weeks.

Peters Baker also said the charges span from Dec. 16, 2010, when the diocese first reviewed questionable images on Ratigan?s laptop, to May 11, 2011, when it reported the images to the police. She said the diocese could be charged as a whole with failing to report sex abuse, as it is an ?incorporated entity.?

The charges are class A misdemeanors. The charge against Finn carries a maximum penalty of a year in jail and a $1,000 fine; the charge against the diocese carries a maximum of a $5,000 fine.

More: Charges a clear message to church, lawyers say [1]

Within minutes after the prosecutor?s announcement word was appearing on Internet sites across the world. The next day, *The Kansas City Star* devoted its entire front page to the news. Catholics here and across the country are trying to understand what it means and what happens next.

For his part, Finn has denied any wrongdoing and has said he will vigorously fight the charges. He has asked the faithful for prayers. ?With deep faith, we will weather this storm and never cease to fulfill our mission, even in moments of adversity,? he said in a statement.

From the inside

Following the indictment, several knowledgeable officials in the Kansas City chancery office who asked not to be named told *NCR* the mood there was ?incredibly somber,? with many staff members unsure of how to

continue with their work.

?If you want to get a sense of the mood here, you only need look at the witness list,? said one source, referring to the list of witnesses called before the grand jury.

That list, given to the press at the announcement of the indictment, named a half-dozen chancery officials, including most of the senior staff. Also listed as having given testimony before the grand jury is the principal of the elementary school attached to St. Patrick Parish, where Ratigan last served as pastor.

A year before Ratigan?s arrest, principal Julie Hess hand-delivered to the diocese?s vicar general, Msgr. Robert Murphy, a letter warning that parents and staff members there were concerned about ?significant red flags? raised by Ratigan?s behavior and were worried he ?fit the profile of a child predator.?

At an ?all hands? staff meeting Oct. 17, said another source at the chancery, Finn addressed questions of how the staff is expected to continue its ministerial work with the focus on the criminal probe.

?No matter what happens, the work of the church has to go on,? the source quoted the bishop. ?The work of the church is larger than one person.?

The meeting, the source said, also saw staff members ask how they were expected to deal with their own frustrations regarding the handling of the Ratigan case, and whether Finn had considered his own resignation.

To that, the bishop was said to have replied: ?I was appointed here by the Vatican and if the Vatican calls and asks me to leave, I will.?

At Finn?s request, former U.S. Attorney Todd Graves carried out a study of the diocese?s handling of the Ratigan case. Graves issued a 138-page report in September finding that ?individuals in positions of authority reacted to events in ways that could have jeopardized the safety of children in diocesan parishes, schools and families.?

Ratigan is in jail on charges filed in Clay County, Mo. Media reports have indicated that a grand jury in that county is also investigating the diocese?s response in the case, and has heard testimony from Finn and Murphy.

Last August a federal grand jury charged Ratigan with 13 counts of production, attempted production and possession of child pornography.

Ratigan?s last parish was in Clay County. The diocesan chancery is located in Jackson County.

Citing the controversy surrounding the Ratigan case, the diocese announced in August that it had decided to delay a long-planned capital fundraising campaign indefinitely.

In September the diocese announced it would go ahead with a separate, annual fundraising campaign after a ?regroup ... on the timing and marketing? of the appeal. The diocese appears to have delayed by several weeks the kickoff date for that campaign, which is now set to begin the weekend of Oct. 29-30.

Around the diocese

Since last May when Ratigan was arrested, local Catholics have expressed frustration and, at times, considerable anger with the way the diocese handled the case.

The uncertain atmosphere in parishes and inside the chancery has a lot to do with questions surrounding Finn?s continued role as leader of the diocese. He has said he will vigorously fight the charges and will clear his name.

People are asking how much this will distract him from his ministry. As one local Catholic, Denise Gilmore, a member of St. Elizabeth Parish, asked: ?How will we be able to move forward??

A former chancery staff member who served on the diocesan review board until Finn was installed in 2005, Gilmore wondered if there is some process for Finn to take administrative leave as the investigation continues.

The diocese, she said, could then continue its work as the bishop prepares to mount his defense.

There are still a lot of ministerial needs in this diocese, she said, and ?we need a leader who can focus on that.?

Jessica McGannon, a parishioner at St. Francis Xavier Parish, said that while her faith remains strong, her ?trust in the hierarchy of the Catholic church is shattered.?

McGannon said she had attended an hours-long workshop on sex abuse before she could volunteer at her children?s school.

?We put our trust in the leadership of our diocese to follow through on what we had committed to by attending those workshops,? McGannon said. ?Now many years later we are having to face this ugly monster again.?

?My sadness is not just for myself and my church community, but for all of the good men and women who have committed their lives to the Catholic church to spread the good news of Christ.?

Another St. Elizabeth parishioner, Steve Beck, said he could ?almost have empathy for the bishop? because it seems Finn didn?t understand what was happening when he first received warnings about Ratigan in May 2010.

But Beck said he would still expect the bishop?s training in matters of sex and sexuality to have enough breadth to have had concerns about the priest immediately. Even if Finn didn?t know the severity of the concerns regarding Ratigan, Beck said, he still seems ?incompetent? for not asking more about them.

Mercy Sr. Jeanne Christensen, a parishioner at Holy Family Parish, about 14 miles north of the chancery offices, said her concern was for the families who had been involved in Ratigan?s pornography. The victims? advocate for the diocese from 2000 to 2004, she said sexual abuse cannot be surrounded in silence anymore.

Many of the victims closest to the Ratigan case were given a chance to speak last spring when the priest was first arrested and it first came to light that the diocese had had reason to suspect him of abuse months earlier. The day after the news accounts first appeared, Finn visited St. Patrick Parish.

Outraged and disillusioned parishioners questioned Finn as he stood alone at the lectern. One after another -- mother after mother, father after father -- lined up to speak directly to their bishop. Many were in tears. Others spoke at the top of their voices, almost without the words to express their anger.

One, a woman who identified herself as a member of the parish for more than 10 years, recounted how she had seen Ratigan tickling young children at the school?s day care program.

?As soon as you knew what was going on, why the hell didn?t you tell me something?? she asked, her voice shaking.

?When a priest becomes our priest, he becomes a part of our family. And this family deserves to know what is going on in this church.?

What comes next?

Other Catholics feel Finn has been singled out unfairly. Steve Connelly, who is helping organize a group called ?Justice for Bishop Finn,? said he and many of the parishioners at Our Lady of Good Counsel Parish just south of the chancery want to ?demonstrate our support for the bishop? in a ?very difficult time.?

?Finn is not the man he is portrayed to be in the media,? Connelly said. ?He is a very holy man, a humble man, and a faithful steward of the magisterium of the church.?

John Harrison, who said he supports Finn but recognizes that the bishop made mistakes in the case, said he couldn?t understand how Finn, ?with the distance he had from the situation, could be a mandated reporter? in the Ratigan case. ?He would have been so far distant from the day-to-day activity of that one priest,? Harrison said.

The next court appearance for Finn and the diocese is scheduled for Dec. 15. The Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, has said the Holy See has ?no intention? of intervening in the case.

One local priest, Fr. Gerald Waris, was pastor at St. Patrick Parish immediately before Ratigan. In a telephone interview, Waris, now retired, said he felt he ?just had? to address Finn?s indictment in his homily Oct. 16 at Visitation Parish, where he sometimes celebrates Sunday Masses. He used the Gospel passage of the apostles in the boat on the lake, when Jesus asks Peter to walk on water.

?The boat took on water, heavy winds, a squall came, and the apostles cried out: ?Please save us,? ? Waris said. ?The metaphor of the boat is the church today. We are in troubled waters.?

Whatever way forward the diocese finds, Waris said, it should involve a public act of apology by the priests of the diocese to the laity.

?We need to have a huge penance service here where the laypeople will act as confessors,? he said. ?The priest should go to the laity for confession and ask for forgiveness before we ever start anywhere else.?

Asked how he thinks priests in the diocese can continue with their work amid the uncertainty, Waris said he keeps thinking of the question from the Book of Micah.

?We have to ask, ?What really is it God asks of us now?? ? Waris said. ?And although we feel pain, we have to continue to act justly and love mercy.?

He added, ?We feel pain for the people. We feel embarrassed. We feel hurt for the victims. We feel ashamed of poor leadership and negligence.

?But that doesn?t put us in a frozen state. I see people doing the work, serving the work, caring for people. We?re doing it. And we?re doing it for the right reasons. We?re not here to serve the bishop; we?re here to serve the church and God, and God?s people. That?s not meant to exclude the bishop, but we should serve with him, not for him.?

[Joshua J. McElwee is an *NCR* staff writer. *NCR* staff writer Zoe Ryan contributed to this report.]

Editor's note: An earlier version of this story incorrectly quoted John Harrison. We regret the error.

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