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Editorial: With impunity for bishops, the cover-ups continue

NCR Editorial Staff | Oct. 9, 2013

In June 2012, Fr. Curtis Wehmeyer was removed as a pastor, after the St. Paul-Minneapolis archdiocese received a complaint of child sexual abuse against him. The archdiocese informed the police, and by November Wehmeyer had pleaded guilty to sexually abusing two boys, ages 12 and 14, and possessing child pornography. He is serving a five-year prison sentence.

Ostensibly, the archdiocese had complied promptly and fully with the Dallas Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, the standards for dealing with priests accused of abusing a minor. The archdiocese certainly spun the story that way. That may have been the final perception, if Minnesota Public Radio had not followed the story to its origins.

MPR learned that Wehmeyer had a long history of inappropriate sexual behavior and brushes with the law and the archdiocese knew it. Despite this, church officials kept Wehmeyer in ministry, and chose not to warn the parishes where Wehmeyer worked. Read the MPR report [1].

Wehmeyer was ordained in 2001 at age 36. The first complaint against him came in 2004 when the archdiocese was informed that Wehmeyer approached two young men ages 19 and 20 for sex at a bookstore. He was sent for treatment and ordered to attend Sexaholics Anonymous meetings. In 2006, a police officer spoke to then vicar general Fr. Kevin McDonough after finding Wehmeyer cruising a park known as a hangout for men looking for anonymous sex.

In 2008, Jennifer Haselberger, appointed chancellor for canonical affairs by the new archbishop, John Nienstedt, flagged Wehmeyer's file because it didn't contain the standard background check. After some digging, she found that Wehmeyer had violated the archdiocese's code of conduct several times. She alerted Nienstedt to this and assumed that it would end Wehmeyer's career as a priest. It didn't.

In 2009, the archdiocese received three more complaints against Wehmeyer. One report was that he had acted suspiciously with boys at a campground -- the same boys Wehmeyer was later accused of abusing, according to Haselberger. Fr. Paul Sirba, then vicar general, called the boys' mother, telling her to help Wehmeyer observe appropriate boundaries, according to MPR reporting. Sirba is now the bishop of Duluth, Minn.

In 2010, Nienstedt promoted Wehmeyer to pastor.

The MPR investigation found a 2011 memo from McDonough to the head of the archdiocese's program for monitoring priests who posed a risk. McDonough wrote that parish employees didn't need to know about Wehmeyer's actions. "[Wehmeyer] really was not all that interested in an actual sexual encounter, but rather was obtaining some stimulation by 'playing with fire,' " McDonough wrote. "This sort of behavior would not show up in the workplace."

"This is just failure after failure after failure after failure," Haselberger told MPR. She resigned from the

archdiocese in April.

* * *

Matthew Riedlinger, a 30-year-old priest from Trenton, N.J., was suspended from active ministry a year ago for exchanging sexually explicit text messages with a person he thought was a 16-year-old boy. Riedlinger's bishop, David O'Connell, had reprimanded him a year before for similar behavior and ordered him to outpatient counseling. When O'Connell learned last year that the behavior was continuing, he took Riedlinger out of the parish and sent the young priest to an inpatient treatment facility. Several months later, Riedlinger was assigned to a supervised residential setting in the diocese to continue treatment. He remained a priest, albeit with "very restricted ministry."

The diocese had also notified the local prosecutor. "In both cases, law enforcement investigated and advised that no minors were involved and no criminal acts were committed," a diocesan statement says. No charges were filed.

Neither the current pastor nor the parishioners at St. Aloysius Parish in Jackson, N.J., where Riedlinger had been assigned, knew any of this story until the weekend of Sept. 21-22 when the Trenton diocese had a statement read at parish Masses. This came only after the local newspaper informed diocesan officials that a story on Riedlinger was in progress. Read *The Star-Ledger* story [3].

This case is complicated by the fact that Riedlinger was caught in a sting. The 16-year-old he thought he was communicating with was an online creation of two graduate students from The Catholic University of America and Georgetown University, whom Riedlinger had befriended before he was ordained. They were also the source of 2011 complaints against Riedlinger. After their repeated appeals to O'Connell to take public action against Riedlinger and warn parishioners went unheard, the two devised a scheme that they hoped would expose Riedlinger as a danger. Their plan unfolded over six weeks in the summer of 2012. The text messages reveal Riedlinger as deeply troubled. Confronted with this, O'Connell moved quickly to get Riedlinger the help he needed.

O'Connell did not move quickly to notify the community where Riedlinger served. They were kept in the dark about Riedlinger until last month.

These two cases clearly show why Catholics continue to mistrust bishops. Despite all the good that the church has done to protect children in the 11 years since the Dallas Charter was adopted, bishops and their officers ignore these standards. They ignore them because they have impunity. Priests can be removed from ministry with just the suspicion of wrongdoing. Bishops and their staff face no consequences. They stay in office and are even promoted. Until that changes, the abuses and cover-ups will continue.

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