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Panel to review archdiocesan policies on all issues related to abuse

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A newly formed Safe Environment and Ministerial Standards Task Force will conduct a full review of the archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis' policies and practices and "any and all issues" related to clergy sexual misconduct.

This includes examining how allegations of clergy sexual misconduct have been handled and what must be done to address any gaps in the process.

The findings and recommendations of the independent lay group will be released publicly when its final report is complete, according to an Oct. 6 archdiocesan statement.

The creation of the task force comes amid sexual misconduct allegations in the media concerning certain priests in the archdiocese and how their cases were handled by archdiocesan officials.

"These allegations must be addressed urgently, transparently and with truly independent review," Archbishop John Nienstedt said. "Addressing these serious allegations is the top priority for the archdiocese."

The archbishop has appointed a new vicar for ministerial standards, Dominican Fr. Reginald Whitt, a professor at the University of St. Thomas School of Law. He will assume full responsibility for all issues related to clergy sexual misconduct, the archdiocese said.

Whitt is appointing the members of the all-layperson task force, which was expected to convene soon. It will consist of at least six people from a variety of backgrounds, none of whom is employed by the archdiocese or any of its parishes.

The archbishop will not review the task force's membership or make any decisions about the membership, the archdiocese said. The vicar will not attend its meetings unless invited by the chairperson.

"What I foresee the task force doing is taking a thorough look at what (the archdiocese) has on paper, what's actually been done, and the extent to which it has not adhered to previously existing standards," Whitt said. "And then to propose ways to put us at a point where we have the best practices in the country."

Whitt will receive the task force's report and ensure it is in compliance with both civil and church law. He will publish the final findings and recommendations as well as implement the recommendations, which the archbishop has pledged to accept.

The Safe Environment and Ministerial Standards Task Force will operate independently of both the vicar for ministerial standards and the archbishop. It will have full authority and all the resources needed to complete its work, the archdiocese said.

"They (task force members) are going to decide what they want to investigate within the parameters of the

charge given to them," Whitt said. "Whatever they recommend to me as reasonable for them to perform their task, it's my business to see that they get it."

Nienstedt said there is "no room for misconduct among our clergy and our standard must be zero tolerance for abuse of minors and vulnerable adults. We hold a sacred trust. Our very vocation requires the highest standard of conduct so that all may be drawn to the person of Jesus Christ through our witness."

Whitt said he is impressed by the archbishop's decision to call for the formation of the independent group to address the issue.

"He's not ducking behind a door," Whitt said. "Rather, he's admitted things have gone terribly awry in our diocese. He wants it corrected, and he wants the basis for that correction to come from people who have expertise and have taken a critical look at what has gone on in the past to ensure the people of the archdiocese that that kind of thing will no longer occur."

"The people of God and the Catholic church in Minnesota deserve the best, and we're going to do what we can to provide them with the best," Whitt said.

The archdiocese will cooperate fully with the task force.

The archdiocese will provide the task force with access to records of the archdiocese related to clergy sexual misconduct, and policies and procedures of the archdiocese related to the handling of clergy sexual misconduct and the protection of children, youth and vulnerable adults from such misconduct.

The task force will issue a report, or multiple reports, if it deems appropriate, to the vicar of ministerial standards.

As directed by the archbishop, the vicar will receive the reports of the task force, ensure that the product is in compliance with civil and canon law, publish the final findings and recommendations, and implement the final recommendations.

While the archbishop retains his authority in the archdiocese, he has committed that he will not interfere in the work of the vicar or the task force.

"There is great concern and confusion about recent media reports alleging that the archdiocese has mishandled investigations into misconduct by priests," the archbishop said in his column Thursday for the archdiocesan newspaper, *The Catholic Spirit*. "This situation is sad and frustrating, and I have heard from many of you that you are deeply pained as you watch and hear these reports in the news."

He was referring to news reports accusing church officials of mishandling allegations of child pornography found on computer files once belonging to an archdiocesan priest. The St. Paul Police Department began an investigation then closed it, citing lack of evidence. But on Tuesday, the police announced the case was being reopened.

The archdiocese said: "We will cooperate with any investigation, as we have cooperated since the outset."

Nienstedt said in his column: "These are very disturbing issues, and I want to reassure everyone in the archdiocese and the community at large that I am taking the events of the past two weeks very seriously. In fact, I do not believe there is anything more important than urgently addressing these allegations and restoring trust."

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