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St. Paul-Minneapolis vicar: Task force will have access to abuse-related files

Brian Roewe | Oct. 29, 2013

The St. Paul-Minneapolis archdiocese's newly appointed vicar for ministerial standards has refuted claims that the lay task force he appointed would not have the access necessary to review policies regarding clergy sex abuse allegations.

On Monday evening, Minnesota Public Radio reported [1] that a letter sent by Dominican Fr. Reginald Whitt to archdiocesan priests gave reason for concern that the Safe Environment and Ministerial Standards Task Force would not be entirely independent and have limited access to information.

In the letter, dated Oct. 21, Whitt wrote: "Access to these files will be within my control, and limited only to what is necessary for the Task Force to be able to make an informed decision with respect to their policy review."

That line raised suspicion about whether the task force would have the "full authority and all the resources needed to complete its work [2]" that the archdiocese promised in announcing its formation.

Whitt told *NCR* Tuesday that the pronouncement still stands.

"I've been charged to make sure that they get everything relevant so they can accomplish the task charged to them. All I can say is I'm going to do my very best to see that this thing is done to completion and is as thorough and as deep as necessary," he said.

He explained his role as supervisor of the distribution of documents and files from the chancery to the task force. Once the task force makes a request for documents to him, he said he relays that to the custodian of the files, who then copies and delivers them.

"I won't even personally handle them because I want to remain agnostic about all of this until the task force makes its report to me," Whitt said. He added he does not examine the requested files, attend task force meetings, have input on their agenda or receive copies of their minutes: "They use me when they need me."

In some cases, the task force can make direct requests to either the chancellor for civil affairs or the chancellor for canonical affairs. In those instances, his role becomes ensuring the files' delivery and resolving any conflicts that might arise.

Whitt said it was unfair to suggest at this point a cover-up or not fully transparent investigation "when its purpose is to disclose ... what was wrong either with the policies or with the implementation of those policies over the past 20-some years."

"Let them do their work," he said.

The St. Thomas University professor said the use of the word "*control"* in his letter "probably was injudicious of me," but he said he wanted to get something out to the clergy, many of whom experienced anxiety about their right to privacy. He didn't deny he was "probably the interlocutor between the chancery and the task force," but reiterated his function is to see they get the documents necessary to conduct their review."

"I'm not going to try to obstruct them. My job is to facilitate their investigation," he said.

In the letter to priests, a copy of which Whitt provided to *NCR*, he said the task force "will review documents of the Archdiocese relating to policies and procedures for preventing, investigating and responding to sexual misconduct by clergy, and all documents relating to the protection of children, youth and vulnerable adults from such misconduct," as well as a review of "any and all issues related directly or indirectly to clergy sexual misconduct in the Archdiocese."

The task force will not have access to review all clergy files, but rather, can request review of specific files to determine whether policies and procedures were followed. Whitt told *NCR* while the task force doesn't have "global access" to archdiocesan files, the only thing limiting access is their scope. Assignment records for priests never accused of sexual abuse, birth certificates and baptismal records are examples he gave as irrelevant to their investigation.

"They have plenary authority within the area given to them, but in areas that aren't given to them, they have neither reason nor right to go into those matters," he said.

When asked who determines what is off limits, Whitt said it becomes his job to weigh their information requests against their jurisdiction.

"If they see something they want, I will make it my business to try to get it for them. If I think that it goes beyond the scope of their investigation, then I'll have to talk to the chair of the task force. We'll work out exactly which way to go on that," he told *NCR*.

The archdiocese formally announced the creation of the task force Oct. 6, along with Whitt's appointment to the newly formed position of vicar for ministerial standards. Both moves came in response to a month of local media reports raising serious questions about the way it handled and responded to allegations or suspicions of clergy sexual abuse of minors.

Among the task force's six members [3] (three men and three women) are a retired police officer with background in online sex crimes involving minors, law professor, human resources director with a background investigating sexual exploitation of refugees in Africa, and psychologist who serves as president of the state's sexual abusers treatment association. Kathleen DiGiorno, an attorney and former compliance specialist with Medtronic, was named its chair.

So far, the task force has only requested some documents, Whitt said, all of which they have received.

"It doesn't do any good at this point to criticize them before they've actually done the work. But I trust in the integrity of their work, I trust in the integrity of the task force, and they appear to trust me, and I certainly have no intention of obstructing their investigation," he said.

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