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St. Paul-Minneapolis archdiocese faces clamor for leadership change

Brian Roewe | Nov. 4, 2013

Attempts in the St. Paul-Minneapolis archdiocese to take hold of a snowballing sexual abuse scandal have done little to quiet a growing clamor for a change in leadership.

Since the end of summer, Archbishop John Nienstedt and his predecessors, as well as other archdiocesan leaders, have drawn intense criticism for their handling of allegations of clergy sexual abuse of minors in recent decades, particularly when they were presented with suspicious behavior or apparent evidence of abuse.

Amid a stream of media reports -- largely fueled by accounts and documents from former archdiocesan canon lawyer Jennifer Haselberger (*NCR*, Oct. 25-Nov. 7) -- Nienstedt's first response came in appointing Dominican Fr. Reginald Whitt vicar of ministerial standards, and assigning him to select an independent lay task force to review archdiocesan policies and procedures related to abuse allegations.

But the shine of that move soon wore off after a letter Whitt sent Oct. 21 to archdiocesan clergy led to questions about how independent the six-member task force would be. Addressing access to individual priest files, he 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."

Whitt told *NCR* Oct. 29 that the use of the word "control" "probably was injudicious of me," and that his role required ensuring the six members of the committee received documents they requested. "I'm not going to try to obstruct them. My job is to facilitate their investigation," he said.

The task force will have access to documents pertaining to policies and procedures for preventing, investigating and responding to clergy sexual misconduct; protecting minors and vulnerable adults from abuse; and all issues related directly or indirectly to clergy sexual misconduct. They can review specific priest files to see if policies were followed, but not all clergy files.

"If they see something they want, I will make it my business to try to get it for them," Whitt told *NCR*. "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."

Whitt, a canon law professor at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, had drawn heat earlier when it became public he shared living quarters at the school with Fr. Michael Keating, who was sued Oct. 14 for allegedly groping a 13-year-old girl (now 28) and sending her emails that were seductive in nature. Denying the claims through his lawyer, Keating, 57, has taken a temporary leave of absence from the university.

The fallout has led others at St. Thomas to resign. Retired Archbishop Harry Flynn, whose tenure (1995-2008) overlapped with the time frames of the scrutinized abuse investigations, resigned from the university's board of trustees Oct. 17. Nearly two weeks earlier, former vicar general Fr. Kevin McDonough resigned from the board. McDonough's assessments regarding several priests -- including Fr. Curtis Wehmeyer, serving five years in prison for criminal sexual conduct involving two boys; and Fr. Jonathan Shelley, alleged to have pornographic

computer images of boys that a private investigator hired by the archdiocese called "borderline illegal" -- have become focal points of the accusations.

Those resignations followed Fr. Peter Laird's stepping down as vicar general Oct. 3, and preceded an Oct. 29 lawsuit accusing St. Louis Archbishop Robert Carlson of not reporting an abuse claim while a Twin Cities auxiliary bishop in the 1980s.

So far, Nienstedt has yet to speak publicly about the allegations, responding once in writing to pre-submitted questions from local media. The archdiocese did not respond before press time to questions from *NCR*. Instead, Nienstedt's most extensive comments came in an Oct. 24 column in the archdiocesan newspaper. Under the title "My pledge to restore trust," he said the accusations give cause "for sadness, confusion and anger."

"The first thing that must be acknowledged is that over the last decade some serious mistakes have been made," he said, pointing to an apparent non-uniform adherence to abuse-related archdiocesan policies, and "a question as to the prudence of the judgments that have been made."

He vowed to impose a more rigorous review of priests before assignments, and recommitted his staff to "following a core set of principles in all that we do." In addition, he announced an outside firm would review all clergy files, to verify his claim that no known abusers remain in ministry.

Still, for some the pledges fell short.

In his Oct. 27 homily, Fr. Stephen O'Gara of the Church of the Assumption in St. Paul attributed the scandal to arrogance, and called for Catholics to demand Nienstedt stop speaking from afar, come clean and address questions in a public forum.

"Tell us the truth. Then maybe, with that truth, we can forgive," he said.

The same day Nienstedt's column was published, the local Catholic Coalition for Church Reform issued a vote of no confidence in his leadership and called for the United States' papal nuncio, Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, to consult with local Catholics in finding a replacement. Another group has launched a petition calling for Nienstedt's removal.

Their calls echoed earlier refrains from priests.

In his Oct. 13 bulletin, Fr. Michael Anderson of the Church of St. Bernard in St. Paul said that Nienstedt's words "ring hollow" and that the archdiocese didn't view civil authorities as allies in protecting children.

"Things can't seem to be more twisted and out of hand," St. Paul pastor Fr. Bill Deziel wrote in the bulletin for the Church of St. Peter a week later, citing "apparent lack of good judgment and common sense" as cause for "a do-over with our archdiocesan leadership."

"Sometimes a fresh start is needed for all involved," he said.

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