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St. Paul-Minneapolis archbishop pledges efforts to restore trust

Brian Roewe | Nov. 15, 2013

Acknowledging a need for transparency, for greater communication and "to be more of a shepherd" than administrator, St. Paul-Minneapolis Archbishop John Nienstedt sought forgiveness of his clergy in mid-November while also announcing his latest steps toward restoring the trust of the Twin Cities.

A Nov. 10 letter from Nienstedt to archdiocesan clergy, following a recent fall meeting, acknowledged a need for a better pastoral approach in his leadership.

"I heard the message clearly: we don't need more programs, but more presence," he wrote.

Additionally, he affirmed a call for a more transparent chancery, more communication, more clerical unity and, ultimately, more than lip service to repair the broken trust among priests and parishioners.

"There must be a humble and contrite recognition of specific mistakes that have been made, and definitive steps taken to repair the damage and rebuild for the future," he said. "Our actions must reflect our words."

Through the letter, Nienstedt also previewed the latest move: releasing the names of priests no longer in ministry but still in the archdiocese with substantiated claims of sexual abuse of minors. Previously, he called for an outside firm to review of all clergy files.

[*Update*: The archdiocese announced Thursday that it had hired Kinsale Management Consulting to lead the review. The firm is directed by Kathleen McChesney, a former FBI official who left the bureau in 2002 to become the first head of the U.S. bishops' Office of Child and Youth Protection. Check back later at NCRonline.org [1] for more coverage on the hire.]

"It is clear to me now that appropriate disclosure is an *essential* step in regaining trust and confidence," he said. "This decision on disclosure will take us to a new level of accountability and in the end, I believe it will clear away the suspicion and lack of transparency for which we have been accused."

The disclosure is contingent upon the Ramsey County District Court lifting a protective order imposed in 2009. Nienstedt explained that while priests and deacons reserve the universal right to protect their privacy and good reputation, it hinges upon preserving that reputation through their actions.

"While it can be painful and feel unfair to have past failings exposed in the media, it does not excuse Church authority from the obligation to carry out justice with mercy and concern for human dignity," he said.

"We must also acknowledge that a right to privacy does not equate to a right to secrecy regarding serious misconduct in the past. Illegal or immoral offenses actually committed by a member of the clergy affect the entire ecclesial community, and so are not then simply private matters.

"As priests of the People of God, we must be absolutely unwavering in our commitment to holiness and virtue. We must also understand that what may have been tolerated twenty years ago, no longer is: our standards today

are different," Nienstedt said.

Another letter followed the next day -- this one posted on the archdiocesan website and recorded for Minnesota Public Radio -- announcing the decision to disclose names, but also addressing the latest MPR report fueled by documents provided by former archdiocesan canon lawyer Jennifer Haselberger.

The Nov. 11 story profiled Fr. Clarence Vavra, a 74-year-old retired priest who remained in ministry through 2003 despite admitting in 1995 through a psychological review that he tried to rape a preteen boy during the 1970s on a South Dakota Indian reservation.

In his open letter, Nienstedt confirmed the report that Vavra engaged in sexual contact with several boys and adult males and that lapses in judgment occurred.

"Serious errors were made by the archdiocese in dealing with him. In the spirit of offering him a path to healing and redemption, too much trust was placed in the hope of remedying Vavra's egregious behaviors. Not enough effort was made to identify and care for his victims," he said, admitting that current standards would have required Vavra's permanent removal from ministry and immediate notification of civil authorities.

Nienstedt explained the decision not to defrock but to sequester Vavra "was based on a desire by the archdiocese to be responsible for such men versus placing them outside of the Church and unsupervised as lay citizens who would have no restrictions," saying the Vatican approved the decision, and "there was an earnest effort to be responsible."

While he held firm to his contention that during his tenure the archdiocese has complied in all cases requiring mandated reporting, Nienstedt conceded that "a full review and analysis" of the archdiocese's monitoring program is needed and promised "major changes."

For critics, though, the latest actions have had little effect in rebuilding trust in the archdiocese. Bob Schwiderski, director of the Minnesota chapter of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, equated a partial list of known abusers to buying a loaf of bread and only receiving the heel. To restore trust, he told *NCR*, a first step for the archdiocese should be, rather than make statements from the chancery, "to go to where the damages, the injuries were inflicted and be pastoral." Visting parishes and saying from the pulpit, "We are here to help," Schwiderski explained, can provide validation for many victims.

"It is one of the steps for healing and recovery for some. A limited list is nothing but a continued injury to those that have been abused," he said.

The plan of action has also done little to sway Haselberger from the position she took in the public statement she attached to her letter of resignation. In it, she called for the archdiocese to permit a comprehensive, external review of all archdiocesan clergy files, and afterward, to remove and make public those discovered to have abused or who pose a reasonable threat to children.

"Nothing that they've pledged themselves to do accomplishes that," she told *NCR* Nov. 13.

Before Nienstedt's latest letter, several prominent donors to the archdiocese made public their decision to halt donations until it replaces its archbishop.

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