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US bishops' point man on sex abuse addresses Kansas City case

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Joliet, Ill., Bishop R. Daniel Conlon, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on the Protection of Children and Young People, is pictured in Rome in 2011. (CNS/Paul Haring)

In the wake of the first conviction of a Catholic bishop in the decades-long clergy sex abuse crisis, bishops throughout the country have to recognize they are accountable to their own people for their actions to protect children, the bishop who heads the U.S. bishops' committee tasked with advising their national conference on sexual abuse said Tuesday.

Bishops also have to be "firm" in applying the procedures that the body of bishops adopted 10 years ago to prevent child abuse, said Joliet, Ill., Bishop R. Daniel Conlon, the chair of the U.S. bishops' committee for the protection of children and young people.

Conlon spoke to *NCR* by phone from the sidelines of a meeting of the U.S. bishops' administrative committee. He addressed last week's conviction [1] of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo., Bishop Robert Finn for failing to report suspected child abuse.

In a non-jury trial Sept. 6, Finn was found guilty of one count of failing to report suspected child abuse, a misdemeanor in the state of Missouri, making him the first sitting U.S. bishop to be convicted of a crime stemming in the decades long sex abuse scandal.

During Tuesday's interview with *NCR*, Conlon discussed the impact of that conviction on the continuing progress of the national church to address sex abuse, 10 years after the U.S. bishops' adopted the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People.

"We've got a long, long way to go," Conlon said. "But I think that diligent application of the Charter is essential. That doesn't mean that there's going to be 100 percent perfection because we're still human beings.

"And we have 190 dioceses in the United States. I can't help the fact that if there is a flaw in one place, that it's counted against all of us. I can't help that."

Following is *NCR*'s interview with Conlon, edited slightly for context and length.

***NCR*:How do you see the U.S. bishops' conference addressing concerns about how the church handles reports of abuse in the light of Finn's guilty verdict?**

Conlon: I think what this case brings up is that we always have to err on the side of caution -- we have to err on the side of protecting children. If there's any, any possibility that the law has been broken, if there's any possibility that an act of abuse has occurred, whether recently or in the decent past, then we need to report it to

the civil authorities. We should never hesitate.

In the Kansas City case, we know that Bishop Finn never consulted his diocesan review board about a priest in possession of child pornography. How is that being dealt with by the national conference? What happens when a bishop doesn't report it to a review board?

I think we have to make a distinction between what is printed in the charter -- and that, of course, is what we have bound ourselves to -- and what is good practice. The charter states that diocesan review boards are "to advise the diocesan/eparchial bishop of its assessment of allegations of sexual abuse by minors and its determination of a cleric's suitability for ministry."

That's what it says. Not -- it seems to me by interpretation, and this is just a matter of interpretation -- that if the review board is going to fulfill its responsibility as laid out in the charter to advise the bishop in his assessment of allegations of sexual abuse, then it has to be notified that there's been an allegation.

Again, as I said in terms of reporting to civil authorities, likewise in reporting to the diocesan review board. The bishop has to, it seems to me, report any allegation of abuse to the review board so that it can fulfill its obligation of advising them. And I don't think the bishop should put a doubt before that obligation to bring the matter to the review board.

In cases like Kansas City, how do you see the issue of accountability for bishops who don't follow the guidelines in the charter? What should happen to them?

The responsibility that we have to deal properly with allegations of abuse, to try to create a safe environment for young people is part of our overall responsibility for pastoral care of God's people.

In looking at that general responsibility, the first person to whom we are accountable is Christ, who is the good shepherd, and we're called to act in his place. That's a very serious responsibility to the Lord himself.

Secondly, a bishop is accountable to the representative of Christ who calls a bishop to that office of bishop and that's the pope. So each bishop is directly on earth accountable to the pope.

And then a bishop, I think, is also accountable to the people of the diocese. And has to be attentive to what people say, what he hears people say -- the priests, the deacons, the laypeople in the diocese. He has to listen to what people say in terms of how they feel he is fulfilling his office.

In terms of accountability on the issue of child abuse and child protection, all of us, every day, have to ask ourselves if we are being accountable to all three points.

In instances like this, is there any accountability for bishops from the members of the U.S. bishops' conference or does everything have to come from Rome?

There definitely is no accountability to the conference of bishops. There is an accountability to the college of bishops, the whole college of bishops. But the conference of bishops has no authority over individual bishops and the individual bishop has no accountability to the conference other than a sense of fraternal responsibility.

I mean, I pray for the bishops of the United States, and I am concerned about my brother bishops across the country, that sort of thing, but we have no line responsibility for other bishops. It's more the spiritual, fraternal kind of responsibility.

How do you address the questions of trust here? Even with the changes since adoption of the charter, laypeople in parishes and schools around the country have to trust that their bishop will report these things to the review board or to civil authorities, should they come up. How do you address that issue after the verdict in Kansas City?

I think sometimes in our human relationships, we have to presume trust. I think that, for example, when two people marry, they have to presume trust in one another. I think that when a bishop is appointed to a diocese, the people have to presume that they can trust him to carry out his responsibilities.

And if they begin to see that he fails in that trust, then they're going to lose trust. And just as spouses may lose trust in one another as they see each other fail. But they don't start out with the presumption of not trusting.

And I think that it's important to treat each human being on his or her individual terms. I think it's wrong, for example, for a husband or wife to say, "I'm not going to trust you because I know there are a lot of husbands and wives who are not trustworthy."

So I don't think we should treat all bishops as untrustworthy because one or two or three or 10 or 20 have failed to fulfill their responsibilities in one form or another. But this issue of child abuse is extremely important. A lot of human lives have been devastated by sexual abuse within the church.

So I believe that bishops have an extraordinary level of responsibility to deal with these allegations. At the same time, there is a lot of prudential judgment that has to be exercised. And I have discovered over the years that no two cases ever seem exactly the same.

But the basic responsibility of reporting an allegation to the civil authorities and cooperating with the civil authorities in any investigation that they undertake is very straightforward. It's a very simple obligation. And I think that people should be able to assume that the bishop or anyone who is operating directly under the authority of the bishop is going to make those reports.

You were reported in recent days as saying that the church's credibilityon this issue was "shredded."[2] In the light of hoping that there's trust there, how can the bishops address that trust when their credibility seems to be so devastated over the past few years?

I was speaking at a national conference of safe environment coordinators and victims' assistance coordinators, so I wasn't addressing bishops.

That particular phrase, "our credibility is shredded," was specifically in a part of the talk where I was suggesting that the victims' assistance coordinators and safe environment coordinators might be of some help to the bishops in putting the work that they're doing out to the media. I was trying to say that the bishops' credibility with the media is shredded.

It is different. I was not saying that our credibility in general is shredded. I'd like to say that we still have some credibility with Catholic people and maybe in some other quarters as well. But we do have a credibility issue, there's no question about that.

On the other hand, I think we have made considerable progress. There's a recent Pew study that suggests we've made some progress in not only creating a safe environment for young people and dealing effectively with incidents of abuse, but in terms of our credibility.

But we've got a long, long way to go. And I think that in addition to the usual spiritual assistance that we have

to count on -- and that's very important, we do have to count on prayer and the Holy Spirit to help us -- but I think that diligent application of the charter is essential. That doesn't mean that there's going to be 100 percent perfection because we're still human beings.

And we have 190 dioceses in the United States. I can't help the fact that if there is a flaw in one place, that it's counted against one of us. I can't help that.

But we have to try to prevent that by doing the best we can. But I don't think we're ever going to get to a point where there are not going to be failures. No institution in the world, including the Catholic church, even with the divine assistance that we have, is going to be perfect.

That doesn't mean that we should excuse our mistakes or that we should not be held accountable for our mistakes. I think continuing to be firm about applying the norms of the charter is a very important step.

Is there anything that we didn't get to that you'd want to say about this issue?

Just to be clear, I don't think that there's much room for making excuses for failures. To acknowledge that there are going to be failures is simply dealing with the reality of life. But, at the same time, I want to be clear that I'm not trying to make excuses. And I do think that bishops, in this area of child abuse, have to expect a very high level of accountability.

Accountability from civil and church authorities?

Yes. But all things in proportion.

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