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Only minor changes proposed for abuse charter revision

Dan Morris-Young | Jun. 15, 2011

Hyatt Regency Bellevue on Seattle's Eastside is the venue of the bishops' meeting.

BELLEVUE, WASH. -- If approved as submitted to the U.S. Catholic bishops today during their semi-annual meeting here, the revised "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People" would feature little more than date and number updates and language tweaks for clarity.

And that has some observers discouraged.

A major portion of the general assembly was reserved for a review of the charter first approved in Dallas in 2002 and then revised in 2005.

Debate was expected to be fueled by the recent release of "The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950-2010," often called the John Jay report because if was written by researchers from the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. The report was eight years in the making.

The John Jay report "is a jumping-off point from which the Catholic church and especially its leadership must continue to take steps to show that it will be steadfast in addressing the sexual abuse of minors, " Bishop Blase J. Cupich of Spokane, Wash., chairman of the bishops' Committee on Child and Youth Protection, wrote in the May 30 issue of *America* magazine

"This is not a time for the bishops to sit back and applaud themselves for getting a handle on a shameful moment in church history," he added. "If anything, the church's leadership must now step forward and give new vitality to its promise to protect and its pledge to heal."

According to the meeting schedule, the charter revision draft is scheduled to be offered to the general body of bishops this morning with debate scheduled for discussion during a dinner meeting this evening, closed to the press.

A member of the bishops' Committee on Protection of Children and Young People which prepared the updated Charter document noted that amendments to it could be offered from the floor of the bishops' meeting. He

indicated he had heard the potential of some being offered that "might make the Charter even tighter, stronger."

He did not elaborate.

Clergy sex abuse advocates had hoped that the bishops would use this opportunity -- coming in the wake of recent clerical sexual abuse revelations in places including Philadelphia and Kansas City, Mo. -- to add more teeth to the Charter and its accompanying "Essential Norms for Diocesan/Eparchial Policies Dealing with Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests or Deacons."

However, most of the changes to the charter under consideration involve bringing it into line with recent Vatican instructions in response to the crisis of sexual abuse of minors by priests.

BishopAccountability.org, issued a press release yesterday saying it was "dismayed" that the revised Charter draft "is almost identical with the current policy despite horrifying evidence ? that the church's current policies are dangerously lenient and full of loopholes."

It had obtained an advance copy of the draft from "a bishop who does not wish to be identified or interviewed," the Boston-based organization's founder, Terence McKiernan, told NCR.

The group posted a copy of the proposed draft on its Web site (www.bishop-accountability.org) along with a critique of the charter.

BishopAccountability.org called for these changes to the charter:

- Mandatory reporting of all allegations of sexual abuse to diocesan review boards, "not just the ones that the bishop selects";
- Requiring "bishops and their officials" to "report all allegations, without exception, to civil authorities";
- Beefing up "zero tolerance" by demanding bishops "immediately remove priests who are accused of abuse," arguing that "currently, accused priests can continue to minister for months or even years at the discretion of the bishop";
- Reinstatement of appellate review boards so abuse survivors would "be able to appeal a review board decision;"
- Tightening confidentiality agreement language to address situations where it appeared "that survivors are still being coerced into signing" them;
- Develop a "strict code of conduct" for victim's assistance coordinators in wake of evidence of "betrayal of survivors ? recently revealed in Philadelphia and Cleveland;"
- Specifying that "any bishop who abuses a child or enables the abuse of a child, or has done so in the past" be reported to civil authorities, not the papal nuncio as the bishops' revisions propose."

The other major document up for a vote by the bishops is "To Live Each Day With Dignity," which would be the first statement on assisted suicide by the full body of bishops.

[Dan Morris-Young is NCR West Coast correspondent.]

More coverage from the U.S. bishops' meeting in Bellevue, Wash. June 15-17.

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