News



Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, concelebrates the closing Mass at the 2017 convocation in Orlando, Florida. (CNS/Bob Roller)



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This story was updated at 4:15 p.m. Central Time to include a list of members of the USCCB executive committee and comments from Massimo Faggioli and Fr. James Connell.

The head of the U.S. bishops said they will invite the Vatican to conduct an apostolic visitation to the country to lead a "full investigation" into questions still surrounding revelations of sexual abuse by former cardinal Archbishop Theodore McCarrick.

In addition, Cardinal Daniel DiNardo said the bishops will take steps to create channels for easier reporting of abuse and misconduct by bishops, and will push for better procedures under canon law to resolve complaints made against bishops.

The statement from DiNardo, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, came Aug. 16 as the church's clergy sex abuse scandal has resurfaced in furious fashion.

Two days earlier, the Pennsylvania attorney general released a 1,300-page grand jury report documenting historical accounts of clergy sexual abuse in six dioceses of that state that documented the abuse of more than 1,000 children by 300-plus priests over 70 years, with the number of victims believed to be even higher.

That report followed the continued fallout from revelations in June of alleged sexual abuse of seminarians and young adults by McCarrick, once seen as an influential leader both within the church and in politics, having served as archbishop of Washington D.C. The accusations, which McCarrick has denied, led the 88-year-old retired prelate in late July to resign his place in the College of Cardinals.

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In light of these events, DiNardo said the bishops' conference executive committee has met several times recently, including earlier this week, to address what he called "a moral catastrophe."

"We are faced with a spiritual crisis that requires not only spiritual conversion, but practical changes to avoid repeating the sins and failures of the past that are so evident in the recent report," the Galveston-Houston cardinal wrote.

DiNardo outlined three goals — guided by three principles of proper independence, sufficient authority and substantial leadership by laity — established by the executive committee, and said he would travel to Rome to present them to the Vatican, "and to urge further concrete steps based on them." The statement did not indicate when a trip would occur.

"The overarching goal in all of this is stronger protections against predators in the Church and anyone who would conceal them, protections that will hold bishops to the highest standards of transparency and accountability," he said.

The bishops' conference said a "more developed plan" will be presented to the bishops during their annual meeting in November in Baltimore. Members of the executive committee include DiNardo, USCCB Vice President Archbishop Jose Gomez, Treasurer Archbishop Dennis Schnurr, and Secretary Archbishop Gregory Aymond.

The goals outlined by the bishops' leadership begin with a full investigation into questions still surrounding McCarrick.

"These answers are necessary to prevent a recurrence, and so help to protect minors, seminarians, and others who are vulnerable in the future," the USCCB president said.

The bishops proposed that the possible Vatican apostolic visitation would work "in concert" with a group of predominantly lay people identified by the bishops' National Review Board, which advises the bishops on preventing child sexual abuse, and who would be "empowered to act."

"Whatever the details may turn out to be regarding Archbishop McCarrick or the many abuses in Pennsylvania (or anywhere else), we already know that one root cause is the failure of episcopal leadership. The result was that scores of beloved

children of God were abandoned to face an abuse of power alone. This is a moral catastrophe," DiNardo said.

An apostolic visitation is an investigation by the Vatican into any number of aspects of church, including dioceses, religious orders and universities. It is believed the last such visitation to the U.S. concerning clergy sexual abuse occurred in 2014, when a Canadian archbishop visited the Kansas City-St. Joseph, Missouri, Diocese to investigate the leadership of its now former head Bishop Robert Finn.

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Earlier this year, Francis sent Malta Archbishop Charles Scicluna to Chile to investigate the clergy abuse crisis in that country, though it was not seen as an official apostolic visitation. Following that investigation, nearly all of Chile's 34 bishops offered the pope their resignations following meetings in May at the Vatican. So far Francis has accepted five of them.

Massimo Faggioli, a church historian and theologian at Villanova University, said the statement from the U.S. bishops represented "a step forward" from the situation in Chile, in that Vatican intervention there was not requested. He told NCR it would be important for a meeting between U.S. bishops and Pope Francis to happen "very soon," perhaps before Francis travels next week to Ireland for the World Meeting of Families.

As for the significance of the U.S. bishops putting forth a plan, Faggioli said it acknowledges the current state of affairs isn't simply a continuation of an old story.

"It's a new story, because now it involves seminaries. And so I think it acknowledges that there's mounting pressure on them, especially from lay people," Faggioli said.

Fr. James Connell, a founding member of the Catholic Whistleblowers reform group, said he was skeptical of the plan outlined by DiNardo, including whether an apostolic visitation could have credibility. Instead, he has joined others in calling for more grand jury investigations nationwide, and that any investigation be handled by professionals, perhaps even the FBI.

"They can do their investigation from the Vatican, fine, but there also needs to be independent professional investigators who know how to investigate," Connell said.

Beyond a visitation, DiNardo said the bishops would update their 2002 "Statement of Episcopal Commitment" in an effort to clarify avenues available to victims to report abuse or sexual misconduct by bishops and to develop "reliable third-party reporting mechanisms." He said that such mechanisms "must be free from bias or undue influence by a bishop," such as efforts by a bishop to deter complaints, meddle with an investigation or skew resolutions.

The Statement of Episcopal Commitment is attached to the bishops' Charter for the Protection of Young People. It meant to serve as a way to address how bishops would hold themselves accountable, as the charter was restricted to clergy under the authority of a bishop.

At their spring assembly in June, the bishops voted 185-5 to approve minor changes to the charter, electing at that time not to address further revisions regarding bishop accountability.

DiNardo in his statement made clear that the pope alone has the authority to discipline bishops or remove them from ministry. He said the U.S. bishops would study the canonical procedures for filing a complaint against a bishop "with an eye toward concrete proposals to make them more prompt, fair, and transparent and to specify what constraints may be imposed on bishops at each stage of that process."

While the statement did not address possible steps toward discipline for bishops involved in the cover-up of sexual abuse by priests, DiNardo said that the steps outlined are "only the beginning; other steps will follow."

"I have no illusions about the degree to which trust in the bishops has been damaged by these past sins and failures. It will take work to rebuild that trust," the cardinal said.

He continued: "Let me ask you to hold us to all of these resolutions. Let me also ask you to pray for us, that we will take this time to reflect, repent, and recommit ourselves to holiness of life and to conform our lives even more to Christ, the Good Shepherd."

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