News
Vatican



Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich leaves a session of the Synod of Bishops on young people, the faith and vocational discernment at the Vatican Oct. 11. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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Individual Catholic bishops across the United States must renounce some of the supreme authority they have over their dioceses to allow for the creation of a new national body to investigate misconduct allegations, Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich said.

When the U.S. bishops meet in November to consider the continuing clergy sexual abuse crisis, Cupich said the prelates "have to be very clear about an accountability procedure for accusations about bishops."

"Bishops have to, as a group, say, 'We cede our rights as bishops to have somebody else come in and investigate us,' " the cardinal told NCR. "Every bishop has to be willing to say, 'I will allow myself to be investigated by an independent group if there is an accusation against me.' "

In an exclusive Oct. 13 interview, Cupich spoke about what the U.S. bishops should do during their annual meeting — to be held in Baltimore Nov. 12-14 — to address concerns raised after the revelations about now ex-cardinal Theodore McCarrick's abuse of seminarians.

The Chicago cardinal, who is taking part in the Oct. 3-28 Synod of Bishops as a papal appointee, also spoke about his own experience working with abuse survivors, the

mentality bishops need to adopt in allowing themselves to be held accountable, and the scapegoating of priests with homosexual orientation.

He also addressed for the first time the resignation of Washington Cardinal Donald Wuerl, who ended a five-decade career Oct. 12 in the wake of a Pennsylvania grand jury report's findings about his handling of abusive priests in the early 1990s.

"I was not surprised that he decided that it was important for him to step aside for the good of the church, because he's always put the good of the church ahead of everything else ... even to the point of saying, 'I made mistakes,' " said Cupich, referring to Wuerl's several apologies for some of his decisions as bishop of Pittsburgh from 1988-2006.

"That's the man I know," Cupich said of Wuerl. "He's an honest man who has always tried to do his best in love for the church, even to the point where he's big enough to admit that he made those mistakes."

Cupich, speaking in a 40-minute interview that was his first during the synod, said Wuerl's resignation is "a moment for people to step back and also look at all the ways that he has contributed to the life of the church."

Wuerl's contributions are "enormous," said Cupich. "If we're really going to tell the truth, we have to make sure that we tell the whole truth and take this moment to appreciate his contributions."

On the question of gay priests, Cupich said: "We have to make sure that everybody in the church lives an authentic, chaste life. That's without question."

"But the research has shown that the abuse crisis, the abuse of minors, was in fact due to other factors beyond somebody being gay," he said. "That's very clear. The research showed this. This is not my opinion."

"I think we take our eye off the ball if we don't deal with the business of privilege, power and protection of a clerical culture," he said. "Those three elements have to be eradicated from the life of the church. Everything else is a sideshow if we do not get at that."

In discussing the need for individual Catholic prelates to cede authority to allow for the creation of a new national investigative body, Cupich acknowledged that the national bishops' conference does not have the power to institute such a body on its

own.

"The bishops' conference can't do it," he said. "It has to either come from Rome or [the] individual bishop."

Although Cupich said he was not exactly sure what the structure of the new investigative body should look like, he specified that it "has to be some sort of lay oversight committee that is tasked with receiving accusations, allegations about bishops, or bishops' mishandling of these [abuse] cases."

He said the new national body is needed to rebuild trust between laypeople and bishops and "to make sure that there's not even the appearance of favoritism" when investigating an allegation against a prelate.

"Our people are not out to get us," said Cupich. "They want the church to succeed. They want the bishops to succeed."

"But they also want to help and we should not be afraid of that," he said.



Pope Francis meets with officials representing the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops at the Vatican Sept. 13. From left are Archbishop Jose Gomez of Los Angeles, vice president of the conference, Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, president of the conference, Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston, president of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, and Msgr. J. Brian Bransfield, general secretary of the conference. (CNS/Vatican Media)

This summer's revelations about McCarrick, one of the U.S. church's most influential leaders of the past quarter-century, have led many Catholics to ask why complaints about him were not reported earlier and to call for an independent process to evaluate future accusations against bishops.

McCarrick served as archbishop of Washington from 2000-06. The Vatican removed him from ministry in June after an accusation was deemed credible. Other accusations have since surfaced, and in July he became the first U.S. prelate to renounce his place in the College of Cardinals.

The U.S. bishops' administrative committee announced in September they had approved creation of a "third-party reporting system" for allegations against prelates, but did not give specifics. The matter is expected to take center-stage in November.

Cupich, who does not serve in the leadership of the bishops' conference, said he had not yet received any preparatory materials for the November gathering. "I'm sure that they're working on it, but at this point we've not received anything," he said.

"This is not rocket science," he said. "We can be transparent. We can have a method of accountability. We can get this done. This should not be something that is laborious for us."

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Listing credibly accused priests

Cupich said his motivation to deal with clergy sexual abuse "as honestly as possible, and with transparency and accountability" comes from his encounters with survivors.

The cardinal shared his memory of his first meeting with a survivor, which he said came while he was serving as the bishop of Rapid City, South Dakota from 1998-2010. He recounted speaking with a man in his 50s who had been abused by a priest decades earlier.

"It occurred to me as he was talking that I was listening to a nine-year-old boy," said Cupich. "It was just heart-rending the way he told the story because he recounted details in a very graphic way, a very real way."

"I think that is something we have to be in touch with," he said. "Our words of apology don't mean anything unless we're in touch with that and sit across from victims and really allow ourselves to be impacted by the trauma, the pain, that they suffered."

Cupich said his first reaction to hearing the man's story was "anger, deep anger," but that he "turned that anger into a resolve that I was going to make sure that victims always come first, that I'm going to look for a way to make sure that the church gets this right."

That experience motivated him to serve several times on the U.S. bishops' committee that deals with protecting children from abuse, which he has chaired in the past.

Cupich said that after hearing the survivor's story he went to the parish where the priest had served, took down a picture of him, sent letters to every other parish where he had worked, and made a public announcement about the matter.

"I wanted to saturate this story among all the parishes, so that other victims would be free to come forward," said the cardinal, adding he hopes that the recent coverage likewise allows victims to report their abuse.

"People ask me all the time, 'Are you tired about this onslaught of news? It keeps coming back,' " he explained. "I say, 'No, because this publicity, this news, is freeing

victims to come forward.' "

The pain such publicity causes the church "is a small price to pay if it liberates people like this man who came forward," he said.

"It just gave me a resolve that we're not going to mess around with this," he said of the experience. "I am going to see victim survivors when they want to come in and talk to me, we're going to reach out to them, we're going to be transparent."

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Besides the issue of a national body to investigate allegations against prelates, Cupich said he thinks the U.S. bishops must also address in their November meeting the revelations of abuse contained in the Pennsylvania grand jury report.

That report, which was released Aug. 14 and looked into how the church handled abuse across six of the state's dioceses, identified at least 1,000 children as victims over a seven-decade period.

Cupich said that the bishops' Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, adopted in 2002 after the series of reports on abuse in Boston, mandated that the prelates "should be transparent with people and reach out to victims."

"Do we know if all those victims received pastoral care and attention?" he asked of the 1,000 survivors. "Or the priests: were all of those priests removed? Were they reported to Rome, like they should have been, even if they were older cases?"

Acknowledging that the charter does not mandate that bishops must publicly list priests in their diocese who have been credibly accused of abuse, Cupich asked: "Should they have been posted so other victims can come forward?"

"I think we have to say that people who have substantiated cases, credible accusations, should be listed publicly for victims to come forward," he said. "I've always done that. Now, not all the dioceses have done that. But I think we have to agree that that's the best way forward."

Asked if he thought the bishops' conference should tell its members to list all credibly accused priests, Cupich responded: "I think that's part of the accountability that we should hold each other to, yes."



Members of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests hold signs during a news conference in front of the headquarters of the Diocese of Erie, Pennsylvania, Aug. 21. They gathered several days after a Pennsylvania grand jury released a stinging report that said more than 300 priests sexually abused more than 1,000 children during the course of several decades. (CNS/Chaz Muth)

'Leadership demands that we step forward'

In terms of what mentality bishops have to adopt in allowing themselves to be held accountable, Cupich said it is important for prelates to be reaching out constantly to the people in their diocese and to be learning from priests what their parishioners are experiencing.

"You have to make sure that you're accountable to your priests, because they're the ones who are on the frontlines with the people," he said. "They tell you what the people are saying, maybe before the people do."

Cupich said that when he meets with groups of his diocesan priests, he always tries to make at least a half-hour available for a question-and-answer session.

"I tell them nothing's off the table, and I'm not going to be insulted by anything," he said. "I think communication is a big part of accountability."

Cupich said he tries to recognize that even when someone complains about the church, they are doing so out of a desire to make it better.

"Beneath that anger is also a sadness in the hearts of many people that they know we can do better," he continued. "And we have to be big enough not to react to the anger, but to be in touch with the sorrow."

"You cannot become defensive," he said. "That doesn't work. You don't get anywhere. Leadership demands that we step forward and are willing to absorb the anger of people, but look beneath what's happening, what's there."

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This synod, which is focusing on the needs of young people today, is the second Cupich has taken part in, after the 2015 synod on family life issues.

The cardinal said his experience of the gathering, which has brought 267 prelates and 72 auditors to Rome for its discussions, has been both "enriching and disturbing."

"I think that this is jarring for us ... in the Western world, especially in the United States, to be in touch with the trauma, the difficulties, the struggles, the challenges of youth throughout the world," said Cupich, mentioning in particular the speech of a young man from Iraq who spoke about living through the violence in his country.

"I find myself falling into the trap of living in my own zone about the issues and the concerns that we have in the United States," he said.

Asked how the synod was balancing concerns from both developed and developing areas of the world, Cupich said one point of convergence among young people across the globe is their search for authenticity.

"It's not as though they're looking for a perfect church," he said. "They're looking for an authentic one. They can tolerate mistakes, but they can't tolerate inauthenticity or a lack of honesty about the tough issues of the day."

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