News



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The Diocese of Nashville, as part of its ongoing commitment to transparency, accountability and pastoral care, has published the names of the 13 former priests who served in the diocese who have been accused of sexually abusing a minor.

Of the 13, nine are dead and two are in prison. None are in active ministry.

The Tennessee Register, Nashville's diocesan newspaper, said the names were being released after consultation with the priests' council and Diocesan Review Board, which is made up almost entirely of laypeople not employed by the diocese.

The list is posted on the diocese's website and includes the priests' assignments based on official diocesan records.

Files on abuse cases were shared with the Davidson County district attorney general's office nearly 20 years ago.

The names are those of priests against whom an allegation of abuse was made either while an active priest or following his death. Following the report, an investigation was begun, followed by a review of the facts and information obtained.

Following this review, a recommendation was made to the bishop at the time and the bishop decided whether or not an individual priest, if in active ministry, should be dismissed as a priest of the Diocese of Nashville.

Dismissal from the priesthood itself — or laicization — is a canonical process under church law that is completely separate from matters under civil or criminal law.

In 1985, Tennessee state law began requiring that anyone who reasonably expects that abuse of a minor is taking place must make a report to civil authorities. The diocese said its policies and practices have supported and followed that law since it took effect.

On the list are priests who were ordained between 1940 and 1973 and served as priests from the 1940s to the 1990s.

At the time most were ordained, the Diocese of Nashville covered the entire state of Tennessee. The Dioceses of Memphis and Knoxville were established in 1971 and 1988, respectively, and some of the 13 were incardinated in those dioceses.

One of the men was a Benedictine priest from Cullman, Alabama, who was serving in the diocese at the time the abuse occurred.

While diocesan priests have formal assignments, they often have duties in other parishes of the diocese so any of the men could have potentially worked in other parishes or locations.

The Nashville Diocese instituted its safe environment program and began conducting background checks in 1986. In the late 1980s, the diocese began to conduct a series of seminars and informational sessions as well as developing educational programs for students, teachers, and parents on the issue and prevention of child sexual abuse.

Over the years, the diocese has worked in cooperation with Our Kids, the Rape and Sexual Abuse Center, Catholic Charities, and the victim's advocacy group You Have the Power, to enhance a broad safe environment program.

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In 1992, 10 years before the U.S. bishops "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People" was adopted in response to the clergy sex abuse crisis in Boston, the diocese adopted a safe environment program that included a process to review individuals regarding their fitness for ministry and investigating allegations of abuse.

Those procedures had been used on a trial basis in the late 1980s, and when he was bishop of Nashville, Bishop Edward Kmiec promulgated them for the entire diocese in early 1992.

The Diocese of Nashville is one of several dioceses across the country that have decided to release the names of priests credibly accused of sexually abusing minors in the wake of the Pennsylvania grand jury report last summer that outlined allegations from six dioceses in that state.

The Pennsylvania allegations, some of which go back as far as 70 years, involved 301 priests and church workers and more than 1,000 victims. The report also included claims that church leaders covered up the abuse.

Since 2002, the Nashville Diocese and its insurance company have spent approximately $6.5 million on counseling and pastoral assistance to victims of abuse.

The total includes a $1.1 million settlement in lawsuits related to Edward McKeown, a former priest who pleaded guilty in June 1999 to molesting and raping a Nashville boy, in what a prosecutor said was a pattern of abuse involving some 30 boys over more than two decades. McKeown was sentenced to 25 years.

The diocese has been audited several times since the adoption of the "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People" and has been found to be in full compliance with the it every time. Audits are done on all U.S. dioceses to examine they are protecting children from abuse and reporting it.

"We've grown better because of the charter," Bishop Mark Spalding told the Tennessee Register in August after the release of the Pennsylvania grand jury report. "So many more people are open to speaking up, open to reporting and open to holding people accountable. That doesn't mean we're perfect."

"One slip is one slip too many," he added. "One failure to implement the charter undercuts the whole thing."