News



In this 2017 file photo, Bishop Michael Bransfield, then head of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, W.Va., is seen at Wheeling Hospital. The Vatican announced his retirement from the diocese Sept. 13, 2019. (CNS/Colleen Rowan, The Catholic Spirit)

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Baltimore — March 11, 2019
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Archbishop William Lori of Baltimore announced March 11 that a preliminary investigation into allegations of sexual harassment of adults and financial improprieties by Bishop Michael Bransfield, formerly of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, West Virginia, has been completed and will be forwarded to the Vatican for final judgment.

At the same time, the archbishop announced restrictions on the bishop's ministry.

The Vatican announced Bransfield's retirement from the diocese Sept. 13, and Pope Francis appointed Lori as apostolic administrator, with a mandate to investigate the allegations against the bishop.

A news release from the Archdiocese of Baltimore March 11 noted that the preliminary investigation took place over five months. Lori conducted the investigation with the assistance of a team of five lay experts.

The investigative team examined multiple allegations of sexual harassment of adults and financial improprieties, according to the news release. It involved interviews with more than 40 individuals, including Bransfield.

"Pending the assessment of the findings of the Holy See, as apostolic administrator of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, I have directed that Bishop Bransfield is not authorized to exercise any priestly or episcopal ministry either within the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston or within the Archdiocese of Baltimore," Lori said.

The restrictions are an outgrowth of a bishop reporting initiative instituted in January that governs allegations against any bishop in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, believed to be the first of its kind in the nation. The policy was created by the archdiocesan Independent Review Board at Lori's request.

Covered under the initiative are procedures to address potential allegations that a bishop of the archdiocese engaged in child sexual abuse or other inappropriate sexual behavior with a minor; engaged in sexual harassment or misconduct toward an adult; or engaged in activities that constitute seriously negligent supervision or an improper cover-up relating to alleged child sexual abuse by others within the archdiocese.

Although the "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People," adopted by the U.S. bishops in 2002, mentioned only priests and deacons, Baltimore's archdiocesan policy created after adoption of the charter was always presumed to include bishops. In addition to the reporting protocol, new archdiocesan policies that went into effect Nov. 1, expressly include the bishops.

As apostolic administrator, Lori directed the same protocols be implemented at this time in the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston.

The March 11 news release from the Archdiocese of Baltimore also announced that as part of these protocols governing the conduct of bishops in the archdiocese, Lori determined that similar restrictions were warranted in the case of Bishop Gordon Bennett, who served as auxiliary bishop of Baltimore from 1998 until 2004, when he was appointed bishop of Mandeville, Jamaica.

"Since that time, he has not resided in or received any assignment in the Archdiocese of Baltimore or the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston," the news release said. "In May 2006, the archdiocese learned of an allegation of sexual harassment of a young adult by Bishop Bennett. Upon receiving the allegation, the archdiocese immediately reported it to the apostolic nunciature in Washington, D.C."

Bennett, who is a Jesuit, resigned from the Diocese of Mandeville in August 2006 at age 60. At the time, it was announced that he has resigned for health reasons.

Catholic News Service reported then that Fr. John McGarry, provincial of the Jesuit California province, to which Bennett is attached, said in an email to province members that Bennett "will be returning to California for medical assessment and treatment for fatigue and depression."

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As a result of these restrictions, which the Vatican recently gave Lori permission to announce, Bennett is prohibited from exercising any priestly or episcopal ministry in the Archdiocese of Baltimore and the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, the release said.

Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley announced similar protocols for allegations against bishops in the Archdiocese of Boston in a letter March 8.

A report in The Pilot, Boston's archdiocesan newspaper, said that since 2011 the archdiocese has used EthicsPoint, an anonymous, confidential, Web-based system for reporting concerns about ethics violations or finance improprieties. In his letter, O'Malley said the archdiocese also will now use EthicsPoint to report misconduct by a cardinal, bishop or auxiliary of the Archdiocese of Boston.

EthicsPoint is the same system the Archdiocese of Baltimore uses for anonymous reporting of ethical, financial and other allegations against clergy or lay ministers in the archdiocese, including bishops.

In Baltimore, allegations against a bishop are first reported to two members of the Independent Review Board who are both retired judges, Joseph Murphy and Ellen Heller.

The new protocols are designed to bolster the commitment of the Archdiocese of Baltimore to zero tolerance for any bishop, priest, deacon, employee or volunteer credibly accused of sexual abuse.

In addition to the third-party reporting system and reporting allegations against bishops directly to members of the review board, Lori has implemented additional measures to ensure these goals, including:

- Updated child protection policies that include the signing of a Code of Conduct by bishops.
- Issuance of an annual report by the Independent Review Board.
- Re-establishment of a lay Archdiocesan Pastoral Council.

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Gunty is associate publisher/editor of Catholic Review Media, the media arm of the Archdiocese of Baltimore.