News



Archbishop William Lori of Baltimore, apostolic administrator of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, W.Va., right, listens to the homily during Mass in the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception at Mundelein Seminary Jan. 3, 2019, at the University of St. Mary of the Lake in Illinois, near Chicago. (CNS/Bob Roller)

Colleen Rowan

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Wheeling, W.Va. — April 8, 2019
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The Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston is addressing a lawsuit filed by the state "with utmost seriousness," while "steadfastly affirming" the diocese's rigorous child protection standards, said the diocese's apostolic administrator, Baltimore Archbishop William Lori.

West Virginia Attorney General Patrick Morrissey announced March 19 a civil suit against the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston and Bishop Michael Bransfield, the diocese's former bishop.

He alleges the defendants violated the West Virginia Consumer Credit and Protection Act by failing "to disclose to consumers of its educational and recreational services that it employed priests and laity who have sexually abused children."

Pointing to its "rigorous Safe Environment Program, the foundation of which is a zero-tolerance policy for any cleric, employee or volunteer credibly accused of abuse," the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston in a statement reacting to the suit said it "strongly and unconditionally rejects" Morrissey's assertion that it is not wholly committed to the protection of children.

On March 29, Lori addressed the issue in a letter to the priests, religious and laity of the statewide diocese.

"We are addressing this lawsuit appropriately and with the utmost seriousness while steadfastly affirming our ongoing commitment to the rigorous policies and practices in place to ensure the absolute protection of those young people entrusted to our care," the archbishop said.

The faithful also received a letter from the diocese March 22 stating that the diocese's Safe Environment Program employs mandatory screening, background

checks and training for all employees and volunteers who work with children.

"The diocese also does not believe that the allegations contained in the complaint fairly portray its overall contributions to the education of children in West Virginia nor fairly portray the efforts of its hundreds of employees and clergy who work every day to deliver quality education in West Virginia," the letter said.

"While the diocese will address the litigation in the appropriate forum, we wanted to update you, our Catholic families, on our efforts to keep your children safe," it said.

The letter states that Morrissey's complaint is based in part on information included in the diocese's November 2018 public disclosure of clergy credibly accused of child sexual abuse and on other information provided by the diocese to the attorney general over the past five months.

In the public disclosure, the diocese included details concerning both the dates of the alleged occurrences cited by Morrissey and the dates they were actually reported to the diocese, which in many cases were decades later, the letter said.

Some of the allegations of misconduct contained in the attorney general's complaint, the letter states, "occurred more than 50 years ago and some are not accurately described."

In a news release, the Office of the Attorney General stated the complaint alleges that after then-Fr. Patrick Condron admitted he sexually abused a student at St. Joseph Preparatory Seminary High School in Vienna, West Virginia, in the mid-1980s, the diocese allegedly sent the clergyman for treatment and later reassigned him to Wheeling Catholic Elementary School, from 1998 to 2001, without notifying parents it was employing a pedophile at the elementary school.

Condron's priestly faculties were restricted in 2005 and suspended in 2006. He was laicized in 2012.

Morrissey's complaint also alleges the diocese had knowledge of a credible sex abuse accusation against Victor Frobas in Philadelphia but ordained him anyway as a priest for the West Virginia diocese; years later he was named director at Camp Tygart, now known as Camp Bosco, in Huttonsville, West Virginia.

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He faced an abuse accusation at the camp, received treatment and later was assigned as chaplain at Wheeling Central Catholic High School. Diocesan records show he was at the school for two months in 1977 and left the diocese in 1983. He eventually went to prison for pleading guilty to sexually abusing children in Missouri. He died in 1993.

Another priest, who is not named in Morrissey's complaint, allegedly never disclosed on an employment application he was accused of child sexual abuse decades earlier. The diocese reportedly did not adequately check his background and employed him for approximately four years at a parish that operates an elementary school.

In the March 22 letter to Catholics, the diocese included information on its Safe Environment Program. This information also was provided to the attorney general over the past five months, but the diocese said in a statement the information is "not included in the complaint nor adequately referenced in it."

Also included in the letter to Catholics were yearly statistics as reported to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops through the audit process; these include the number of children, clergy, employees and volunteers to whom the Safe Environment process applied. For children, the process involved completion of age-appropriate awareness training. For clergy, employees and volunteers, the process involved awareness training for adults, background checks and receipt of the diocese's sex abuse policy.

The Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston has spent approximately $355,060 on thousands of background checks since December 2004 and $153,861 on VIRTUS awareness training for adults by the National Catholic Risk Retention Group since March 2004.

The letter also said that in addition to the Safe Environment Program administrator and coordinator at the chancery level, approximately 150 local level Safe Environment coordinators work in parishes, schools and other Catholic organizations throughout the diocese "to help keep our youth and vulnerable adults safe by administering the Safe Environment Program to employees and volunteers." The majority of these local level coordinators are laity.

As of 2016, the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston implemented a new diocesan-wide software platform called the ParishSoft Safe Environment Program Manager to track

and document compliance for employees and volunteers. "Implementation of the software was designed to improve accuracy and efficiency and promote uniformity and expediency in verifying a person's status relative to Safe Environment compliance," the letter stated.

The diocese also emphasized it encourages reporting to civil authorities first and foremost.

The letter was sent to all parishes and clergy of the diocese. Printed copies were available to congregants when they arrived for weekend Masses.

"You, the faithful across our state, are living models of Christ through your commitment to spreading the Gospel, helping the least among us and supporting Catholic education," the letter said. "You place your faith, not only in God, but in the diocese to do the same. This is not something we take lightly and we strive each day to fulfill the commitment we have made to you."

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Rowan is executive editor of The Catholic Spirit, newspaper of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston.