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Patricia L. Guilfoyle

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SueAnn Howell

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An independent investigative firm is reviewing the Diocese of Charlotte's priest personnel files as part of the diocese's effort to release the names of all clergy credibly accused of child sexual abuse, the diocese announced Aug. 12.

U.S. Investigative Security Services Agency of Charlotte is conducting a comprehensive review of all priest files since the diocese was established in 1972, searching for any indication of sexual abuse of a minor. Their task involves reviewing tens of thousands of pages in more than 1,000 files.

Any suggestion of abuse turned up will be forwarded to the diocese's Lay Review Board to determine whether the allegations are credible, the diocese said in a statement.

Bishop Peter Jugis of Charlotte has committed to making public the names of any clergy found to be credibly accused, with the goal of publishing a list before the end of this year.

Since 2002, the names of clergy credibly accused of abuse have been publicized – no matter when that abuse occurred – as called for by the U.S. bishops' "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People." The names of at least 20 priests who formerly served in the diocese have already been made public over the years, in the Diocese of Charlotte's newspaper, the Catholic News Herald, and other media.

Since 2002, the diocese has taken a zero-tolerance approach to child sexual abuse and is unaware of any abuse allegations against clergy currently serving in ministry, Fr. Patrick Winslow, the diocese's vicar general and chancellor, told reporters Aug. 12.

This file review is important to providing a comprehensive "public accounting" of clergy credibly accused of child sexual abuse who have served in the diocese since 1972.

Jugis began the process of reviewing personnel files and other historical records last fall, as recommended by the diocese's Lay Review Board and in consultation with abuse victims, clergy and others.

"Most of the allegations of child abuse that we are dealing with now involve incidents that happened decades ago, and, sadly, those victims continue to suffer," Winslow said. "We know that a full public accounting of abuse that took place within our diocese is critical to promoting justice and healing for victims, and we believe that the independent investigation by third-party experts will move us closer to achieving both of these goals."

Winslow announced the investigative firm's role as part of a series of briefings he launched Aug. 12 with reporters to talk about the diocese's ongoing response to the sexual abuse crisis and how protections put in place 17 years ago are working.

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"The Diocese of Charlotte has zero tolerance for child sexual abuse, and we are committed to transparency and accountability in our handling of this crime,"

Winslow said. "The goal of these sessions is to provide important background and context to help media – and the community – understand that the strong child protections and reporting protocols we put in place nearly two decades ago are working."

He said the briefings on how the church has and is responding to abuse allegations are important for two reasons.

"First, we want to continue to express our sorrow and grief and our apologies to those who have been affected by sexual abuse by clergy," Winslow said. "People who have been affected so adversely and wounded need to hear that time and time again. And secondly, it is important for people to realize that the church has had strict, broad, sweeping, aggressive policies since the charter of 2002.

"And since then, for nearly two decades now, we have followed a zero-tolerance policy, effectively dealing with issues as they surface immediately in a way that is both transparent and accountable."

The priest added: "All too often people look at the church from the outside and they wonder what is going on, on the inside. We want people to see what we do. We want them to see the measures we have in place. We want to let people know how rigorously we deal with these issues."

Winslow noted that he is in a unique position to explain how the diocese has worked to respond to abuse allegations and prevent abuse from occurring, because he spent six years working with the diocese's Lay Review Board and serving as the diocese's promoter of justice before being named to his new diocesan post by Jugis in April.

In his previous role, his responsibility was to advocate for victims and serve as prosecutor in church court proceedings. The volunteer Lay Review Board investigates allegations of sexual abuse and sexual misconduct by clergy and other church personnel and advises the bishop on how to respond, in accordance with church protocols, if the board finds allegations to be credible.