Vatican
Vatican News
Pope Francis greets Bishop Richard F. Stika of Knoxville, Tenn., during a meeting with U.S. bis

Pope Francis greets Bishop Richard F. Stika of Knoxville, Tenn., during a meeting with U.S. bishops from Regions IV and V making their "ad limina" visits to the Vatican, Dec. 3, 2019. The regions include the District of Columbia, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, U.S. Virgin Islands, West Virginia, the Archdiocese for the Military Services, Louisiana, Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi and Tennessee. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



by Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Rome — June 27, 2023
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Pope Francis has accepted the resignation of Bishop Richard Stika, the embattled leader of the Diocese of Knoxville, following a tumultuous two-year period in which the diocese was subject to a Vatican investigation and multiple lawsuits over its handling of abuse cases.

The Vatican made the announcement in its daily bulletin on June 27 and did not list a reason for the resignation, nor did it name an immediate successor. At age 65, Stika — who has led the East Tennessee diocese since 2009 — is a full decade younger than the standard retirement age of 75 for Catholic bishops.

For years, questions have swirled around his alleged cover-up of abuse, diocesan finances, morale among priests and the overall administration and management of the diocese.

In an interview with NCR earlier this year, Stika defended his 14-year record in Knoxville, which he maintained had seen an uptick in new parishes, seminarians and donations.

"I see growth, I see financial stability, I see vocations, and I see happiness," he said at the time.

Advertisement

But testimonials on the ground often painted a different story.

In 2021, 11 Knoxville priests wrote to Archbishop Christophe Pierre, the Vatican's representative to the United States, appealing for "merciful relief" from Stika's leadership of the diocese. In two separate lawsuits, the diocese is accused of obstructing investigations into clergy sex abuse and intimidating people who reported they were abused. And at the end of 2022, the diocese was subject to an apostolic visitation to assess the leadership of the diocese.

An NCR report published last month included accounts from six diocesan priests, all who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of being retaliated against by Stika, describing the bishop as an authoritarian and abusive figure who often bullied priests. Stika has adamantly denied those allegations.

A native of St. Louis, Missouri, Stika was ordained a priest of his hometown archdiocese in 1985. From 1994-2004, he served as archdiocesan chancellor, working closely with its then Archbishop Justin Rigali.

Rigali, who in 2003 was made a cardinal by Pope John Paul II, would go on to serve as a member of the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops under Pope Benedict XVI, the influential Vatican department tasked with advising popes on the nomination of bishops.

In 2009, the long-time Rigali protégé was named the third bishop of Knoxville, Tennessee, home to 75,000 Catholics. Upon his retirement in 2011, Rigali moved

into a residence with Stika.

Stika's departure from Knoxville marks the second time in five years that an apostolic visitation has led to the expulsion of a bishop in Tennessee, home to only three Catholic dioceses. In 2018, Bishop Martin Holley of Memphis was removed from the pastoral governance of that diocese after a rocky two-year period.

Earlier this month, on June 18, a group of advocates for child sex abuse victims demonstrated in front of Knoxville's Cathedral of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, as part of a "Time's Up, Rick Rally." The group of protesters called for Stika's immediate resignation.

"The pope says you're fired," read one sign.

Stika, in his own statement released on June 27, said that he has been dealing with a series of health issues, which he attributed to what he described as an early retirement.

"I recognize that questions about my leadership have played out publicly in recent months. I would be less than honest if I didn't admit that some of this has weighed on me physically and emotionally," he acknowledged.

He also noted that he intended to return to the St. Louis area, along with Rigali.

In the immediate aftermath of his resignation, abuse survivor groups and their advocates praised the resignation, but expressed frustration that the Vatican did not publicly disclose the reasons for Stika's departure.

"It has taken far too long to get to this resolution, which demonstrates continued problems with the Catholic Church's willingness to hold bishops accountable for their actions in a timely manner," said a statement from Awake Milwaukee, a Catholic group focused on sexual abuse in the Catholic Church.

"In addition, we are disappointed that Stika was allowed to resign, rather than [be] removed from his position by the Vatican and charged with canonical crimes," the statement continued. "Without any statement by the Vatican, Stika can still try to control the narrative about his departure without taking real responsibility for his serious abuses of power."

A statement from Bishop Accountability, an organization that tracks clergy abuse, said that "Pope Francis should publicly state the reasons for Stika's removal."

"The pope's practice to date has been to stay silent when a guilty bishop is finally forced from office," it stated. "But this silence does harm, and it is inconsistent with the transparency he has promised."

A press release from the U.S. bishops' conference said that Archbishop Shelton Fabre of Louisville, Kentucky, will serve as the apostolic administrator of the Knoxville Diocese until the appointment and installation of a new bishop.

In two letters dated June 27 that he sent to the priests in the Louisville Archdiocese and the Knoxville Diocese, Fabre said he will split his time between both locations. Fabre said he planned to appoint a priest in the Knoxville Diocese to help him care for the local needs there.

Fabre also told the Knoxville diocesan priests that he would be available to meet with them in person on June 28 at the cathedral in Knoxville, and that he would celebrate Mass at the cathedral later in the evening.

[Staff reporter Brian Fraga contributed to this report.]

***Editor's Note**: This story has been updated with additional information.*

A version of this story appeared in the **July 7-20, 2023** print issue under the headline: Pope Francis accepts resignation of Knoxville's embattled Bishop Stika .