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In this 2015 file photo, Archbishop John Nienstedt is seen in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and M

In this 2015 file photo, Archbishop John Nienstedt is seen in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis. (CNS photo/Dave Hrbacek, The Catholic Spirit)

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A multiyear investigation overseen by the Catholic Church into Archbishop John Nienstedt, who resigned from the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis in 2015, has ended with the Vatican finding that he acted "imprudently" in several instances but not criminally under canon law, Archbishop Bernard Hebda said in a statement Jan. 5.

"While none of those instances, either standing alone or taken together, were determined to warrant any further investigation or penal sanctions," Hebda said, "it was determined by Pope Francis that the following administrative actions are justified:

1. "Archbishop Nienstedt may not exercise any public ministries in the Province of St. Paul and Minneapolis (the Province covers all of Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota).

2. "He may not reside in the Province of St. Paul and Minneapolis.
3. "He may not exercise ministry in any way outside of his diocese of residence without the express authorization of the attendant Ordinary and only after the Dicastery for Bishops has been informed."

After having led the archdiocese for seven years, Nienstedt resigned in June 2015, less than two weeks after the Ramsey County Attorney's Office filed criminal and civil charges against the archdiocese for failing to protect children in the case of former priest Curtis Wehmeyer, who was convicted of sexually abusing three minors who were parishioners when he was pastor of Blessed Sacrament in St. Paul. Nienstedt now lives in Michigan.

The civil charges against the archdiocese were dismissed in 2015 in a settlement that included the archdiocese agreeing to be held accountable to a Ramsey County court for creating and maintaining a safe environment for youth and others. The criminal charges were dismissed in 2016.

Questions nonetheless remained about Nienstedt's actions regarding Wehmeyer and the police investigation, as well as separate allegations of inappropriate conduct with adult males and an allegation that the archbishop, when bishop of the Diocese of New Ulm, had undressed in the presence of minors in a hotel room during the 2005 World Youth Day in Cologne, Germany.

In 2018, Hebda, with the recommendation of the Archdiocesan Ministerial Review Board, determined that Nienstedt, like any priest of the archdiocese facing similar accusations, would not be free to exercise public ministry in the archdiocese until all open allegations were resolved.

The questions that remained "necessitated a determination by officials of the Holy See," Hebda said Jan. 5. "Archbishop Nienstedt himself also stated publicly that he would welcome an investigation to resolve the allegations, which he has denied."

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A path for resolution came with promulgation by Pope Francis of his motu proprio *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* ("You are the light of the world") in 2019 establishing procedures for investigating reports of misconduct against bishops, Hebda said. Those procedures have been followed and the investigation is complete, he said.

"At the formal request of individuals here in the Archdiocese, the allegations against Archbishop Nienstedt were thoroughly investigated by officials outside of the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis in accordance with the process set forth in '*Vos estis*,'" said Hebda, whom Pope Francis appointed to lead the archdiocese following the resignation of Nienstedt.

The late Tom Johnson, a former Hennepin County Attorney and later the archdiocese's ombudsperson for victims-survivors of clergy sexual abuse, was one of the individuals calling for a comprehensive investigation followed by a public disclosure of the outcome, Hebda said.

After reviewing the evidence, the Dicastery for Bishops and the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith concluded that the allegations that Nienstedt had committed a "delict" or crime in canon law were unfounded, Hebda said.

"Though the evidence available did not support a finding that any conduct on the part of Archbishop Nienstedt could be judged as a delict, it was communicated to me that several instances of 'imprudent' actions were brought to light," Hebda said, leading to the three administrative actions.

"Please join me in praying that this resolution may bring further healing to our archdiocese and to all those involved in these matters," Hebda said.

Tim O'Malley, who was director of the archdiocese's Office of Ministerial Standards and Safe Environment from 2014 to 2023 and now is an adviser to Archbishop Hebda and senior archdiocesan leadership, said *Vos Estis* was enacted by Pope Francis for "situations just like this one." The case demonstrates that allegations against bishops will be investigated and that there are consequences for failures in leadership, he said.

"While some may disagree with the outcome, I fully support the 'Vos Estis' process as a way to hold bishops accountable, including making the pope's decision known," O'Malley said. "I hope that this resolution promotes further healing in our archdiocese, particularly for those who have suffered because of such failures."

[Joe Ruff is editor-in-chief of The Catholic Spirit, newspaper of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis.]