News



Priests join in prayer during Mass with Pope Leo XIV on the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican June 27, 2025. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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A national group of U.S. Catholic priests has urged the Vatican to safeguard the due process rights of accused clergy. The group faulted bishops for allegedly violating canon law in disciplining some priests cited for misconduct.

The Association of U.S. Catholic Priests, formed outside of Chicago in 2011, asked Pope Leo XIV earlier this month to encourage churchwide obedience to canon law, which holds that accused persons are assumed innocent until facts demonstrate otherwise and that religious superiors "must start a judicial or administrative procedure" to discipline priests.

Since his installation as the first Augustinian pontiff in May, Leo, a canon lawyer by training, has repeatedly urged a "firm and decisive" response from church leaders in clergy sex abuse cases while facing questions about his own handling of abuse allegations in Chicago and Peru.

In a recent report, published early last month and shared with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the priests' group says that some priests facing misconduct allegations have been restricted in their ministry without compelling evidence of wrongdoing and been publicly named as accused before investigations were finished. The report does not provide hard data on how frequently this occurs or how many men in the United States have been affected.

"It is vital to acknowledge that, as with victims, priests too are entitled to a fair hearing and the protection of their reputations," the document says.



Pope Leo XIV waves at the end of a meeting with priests at a Rome auditorium near the Vatican June 26, 2025. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Some priests have sued bishops or dioceses for reputational damage stemming from their handling of abuse allegations. In March 2024, Fr. James DeOreo, a priest of the Diocese of Lafayette, Indiana, filed a defamation lawsuit against his diocese and its vicar general after a minor accused him of sexual harassment, and he was suspended from ministry and subsequently cleared of misconduct.

DeOreo took legal action after his diocese publicly stated that he had been suspended due to "allegations of inappropriate conduct with a minor." His lawsuit was dismissed.

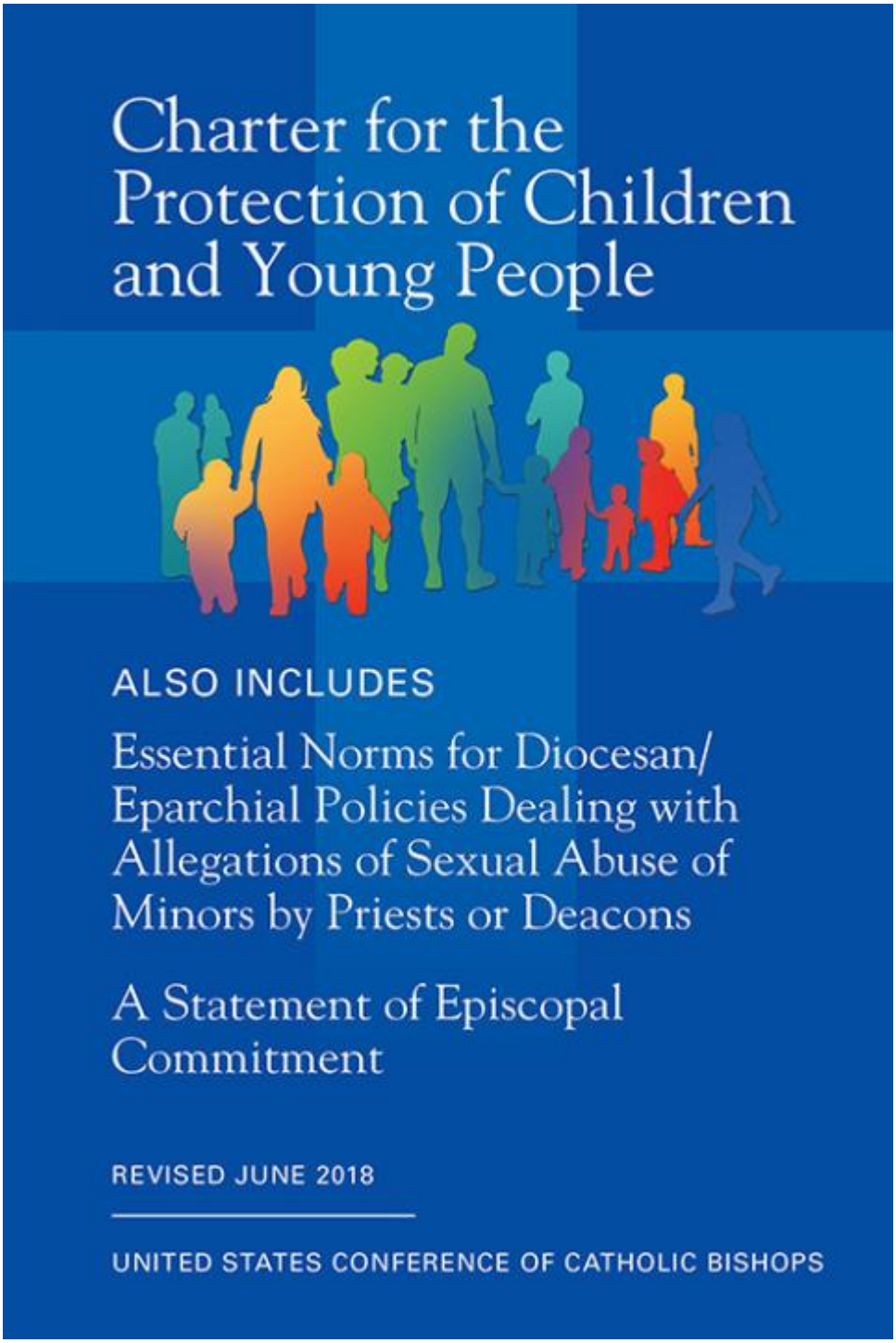
In a separate defamation case, Fr. Daniel Lacroix sued Bishop Edgar da Cunha of Fall River, Massachusetts, after the priest was permanently removed from ministry following accusations of child sex abuse. Lacroix denied these allegations.

Accusations of child sex abuse against priests create a challenging situation for bishops, said Fr. Jim Musumeci, who also helped write the report for the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests.

"[Bishops] have to balance the rights of the wounded and hear the voices of the victims, and at the same time [they] have priests to support," he told NCR. "You can take an accusation very seriously, but you also have to respect the due process rights of the priest."

Fr. Michael Sullivan, a canon lawyer and priest of the Archdiocese of St. Paul-Minneapolis who helped draft the June study, said that bishops' focus on protecting potential victims of sexual abuse has meant a lack of concern for the rights of accused priests.

"I do not want any priest who is guilty of a crime to go free or to continue to work in [the] priesthood," Sullivan said in an email to NCR. "But I don't want any innocent priest to suffer public humiliation or to lose his ability to do good ministry either."



The cover of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People," known as the Dallas Charter (CNS/Courtesy of USCCB)

Concerns that priests have been denied due process are nothing new. In 2004, shortly after the Boston Globe "Spotlight" series tore open the Catholic sex abuse crisis in the United States, popular author Fr. Andrew Greeley chided "eager-beaver

bishops" for transgressing priests' civil rights in an effort to address clergy pedophilia. And the Jesuit Cardinal Avery Dulles, in an essay for America magazine, extensively criticized the "zero tolerance" approach taken by the Dallas Charter, the norms the U.S. bishops adopted in 2002 for investigating child sex abuse.

"Groups of priests still protest that they are not accorded the basic requirements of due process," the cardinal wrote in 2004. "After doing everything necessary to create a safe environment for children, the bishops should ... see that innocent priests are not treated as if they were guilty."

The controversy continues two decades later.

The Association of U.S. Catholic Priests report takes particular issue with publicly revealing the names of priests accused of sex abuse, as many U.S. dioceses and religious orders have done. In February this year, the Dicastery for Legislative Texts, a Vatican body that interprets canon law, released a letter to oppose publishing the names of accused priests unless a cleric posed a grave threat to the safety of certain persons or his community.

The letter, published in Italian, finds that the existence of credible but still unproven allegations requires "a relatively low standard of proof" and does not justify the release of priests' names, which the dicastery says causes significant damage to a priest's reputation. Further, the dicastery opposes publishing the names of deceased clerics with accusations of abuse, as the dead can neither defend themselves nor pose an active harm to others.

Pope Francis, too, criticized the practice of publishing the names of accused clerics before investigations were completed. "It is also necessary to safeguard the principle of natural and canon law of the presumption of innocence until the guilt of the accused is proven," he said in February 2019. "Therefore, it is necessary to avoid the publication of the list of the accused, even by the dioceses, before the preliminary investigation and the definitive conviction."



Priests are seen during a special Mass for vocations at Cure of Ars Church in Merrick, N.Y., Aug. 4, 2022, the feast of St. John Vianney, patron of parish priests. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

But Terence McKiernan, the founder and president of BishopAccountability.org, which compiles documents related to clerical sex abuse, strongly supports publishing lists of accused priests.

"Just because a priest is deceased does not mean you don't know enough to put them on the credibly accused list," McKiernan told NCR.

He also said that these public lists are especially important for the church, survivors of abuse and the wider public. "Because the survivor sees that a bishop puts that person's abuser on a list, there's real validation and consolation that's very valuable to survivors," said McKiernan.

If bishops' lists were to be removed, McKiernan said, it "would be a tragedy for survivors and for the church."

Some church leaders and organizations have begun to amend or remove their lists.

On June 30, the Legionaries of Christ, whose founder, Fr. Marcial Maciel, sexually abused scores of minors, edited its list of accused congregation members in North America by removing the names of members who faced substantiated allegations but were not convicted.

In April, Bishop John Brungardt of Dodge City, Kansas, opted to remove a previously published list of accused priests and seminarians connected to his diocese and stated that releasing the list was "contrary to natural law and canon law," mirroring Francis' language in 2019. All persons included on the Dodge City list had substantiated allegations against them. The bishop himself was accused of sexually abusing a minor and later cleared of wrongdoing by the Vatican in 2022.

Speaking with NCR, Musumeci also mentioned an air of anxiety among many priests related to abuse accusations. He cited a 2022 study from the Catholic University of America, which found that 82% of U.S. priests "regularly fear" fabricated allegations of abuse.

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Some priests have been falsely accused of sexual misconduct, but how often are abuse claims unsubstantiated?

Eighty-one percent of abuse allegations filed against clergy between 2004 and 2023 were deemed credible, according to recent data from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, a social research group connected to Georgetown University. The data, which includes allegations made in dioceses, eparchies and religious communities of men, states that less than 20% of claims were "unsubstantiated" or "obviously false."

Yet recent numbers from a U.S. bishops' committee on child protection complicate the picture. Out of 902 allegations reported between July 1, 2023 and June 30, 2024, more than 40% were deemed unsubstantiated or "unable to be proven." (The report notes that an allegation is "unable to be proven" due to lack of available information, such as "when the accused cleric is deceased or his status or location is unknown.")

More than one-third of accusations remained unresolved by the end of June 2024, reflecting the sometimes glacial pace of abuse investigations.

In 2022, the Dicastery of the Doctrine of the Faith published guidelines for bishops and religious superiors on conducting investigations of child sex abuse by clergy. The norms instruct ordinaries to launch a preliminary investigation to determine if the accusation is plausible and urges church leaders to report potential crimes to authorities if necessary to protect others.

But the dicastery's guidelines also give ordinaries the ability to take what it terms "precautionary measures," such as restricting priests from active ministry or banning them from publicly receiving Communion during the preliminary investigation and before the conclusion of the full judicial process.

The dicastery describes these measures as "administrative" but not punitive, and the doctrine office says this distinction "should be clearly explained" to the accused cleric "lest he think he has already been convicted and punished from the start."