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Bishop: Charter review to look at Philadelphia abuse

by Nancy Frazier O'Brien by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON -- When the U.S. bishops meet in Seattle in June, they will review implementation of the "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People" nearly 10 years after its 2002 passage.

They also will look at "whether there was some sort of the breakdown of the system" that prompted the abuse-related investigation of more than two dozen priests in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, said Bishop Blase J. Cupich of Spokane, Wash.

"I'm confident that the dioceses are doing their work and that the situation Philadelphia is facing -- removing such a large number of priests, the circumstances under which that occurred," is an aberration, the chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee for the Protection of Children and Young People said in an April 15 telephone interview with Catholic News Service.

"We have to wait to see exactly what happened in Philadelphia," he said.

Two priests, a former priest and a former Catholic schoolteacher entered pleas of not guilty in Philadelphia April 15 to charges that included child rape. Another priest who had been in charge of assigning those and other priests pled not guilty to child endangerment. In all, 26 priests have been placed on administrative leave pending an independent investigation of child sex abuse allegations against them following the Feb. 10 release of a Philadelphia grand jury report.

Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia and other archdiocesan officials have stressed that placing them on leave is an interim measure and not a final determination or judgment.

Bishop Cupich has been involved in the U.S. bishops' efforts against child sex abuse from the beginning, as a member since 2002 of what was first called the Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Abuse and its chairman since 2008.

He said the bishops' actions in Seattle will be "not so much doing a review as going back to our principal motivations in crafting the charter."

"Well over 100 bishops have been ordained (in the United States) since 2002, so we want to make sure they are prepared and understand what the motivations were that we had," Bishop Cupich added.

Chief among those motivations is the need to cultivate "close visceral connections with the victims" and to "never lose touch of the ongoing need for healing," he said.

Bishop Cupich spoke during National Child Abuse Prevention Month and a few days after the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops released the results of audits detailing diocesan compliance with the charter. Released with it was a statistical survey by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University showing the number of credible allegations of child abuse against U.S. clergy and the costs associated with that abuse.

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The CARA survey found that there were seven new credible allegations of sexual abuse of minors by priests during 2010. Another 498 new allegations were made during the year, but the vast majority of those were alleged to have occurred between 1960 and 1984.

"Any organization that deals with the number of youths that we do is always going to be vulnerable in some way to a violation of its code of conduct," Bishop Cupich said. "But when you think about how many kids we come across on a daily basis," the number of abuse allegations made "is relatively very miniscule," he added.

It's also worth noting, the bishop said, that the Catholic Church is "the only organization that provides such a report." Other organizations that serve large numbers of children and young people might not have "ways that such information is accumulated, much less reported," he said, adding that the bishops hope their actions will challenge others to publicize the steps they are taking to protect children.

He said full participation in the survey and audits was expected of all bishops. The dioceses of Lincoln, Neb., and Baker, Ore., and five Eastern Catholic eparchies declined to participate in the audits for 2010; only the Lincoln Diocese refused to participate in the CARA survey.

Efforts have been made to help the eparchies, which are generally "spread all over the place and very tiny," with the data collection needed for the audits, Bishop Cupich said.

"We are going to be judged by the worst handling, not the best," he said. "We have a responsibility to one another. The audits are part of what we are doing and everyone should be involved."

Asked how his work with the bishops' committee has changed over the past decade, Bishop Cupich said the biggest change has been the expansion of "the circle of people involved in this effort" -- from the bishops to lay advisers on the National Review Board and researchers at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York to diocesan personnel and parish and school staff members who have participated in safe environment training.

"I've seen a great amount of growth in people taking care of victims," he said. "On any given day, there are at least 1,000 people in the church doing something."

One thing the bishops have learned is "we can't do this alone," Bishop Cupich said. "We need to come together and cooperate and unify our efforts as adults. Our kids deserve nothing less than that."

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