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Bishops open meeting to review sex abuse rules

by Daniel Burke by Religion News Service

BELLEVUE, Wash. -- The nation's Roman Catholic bishops began a review of church sex abuse policies here on Wednesday (June 15), bypassing several recent reports that raise questions about whether the rules are effective at removing abusive priests.

The bishops' brief public discussion seemed a mere prelude to private debates taking place throughout the week behind closed doors. The bishops are scheduled to vote on revisions to the church guidelines on Thursday.

Bishop Blase Cupich of Spokane, Wash., who chairs a church committee dedicated to protecting children from sexual abuse, said the church's current policy is working.

"The charter has served the church well," said Cupich, referring to the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, originally passed in 2002. "It is a helpful tool as we keep our pledge to protect children and promote healing in our church."

Most of the proposed revisions bring church rules in line with Vatican norms issued in 2010, which equate child abuse with abusing the mentally disabled, and make the acquisition, possession, or distribution of child pornography a church crime.

The bishops adopted the charter and related rules known as the "Essential Norms" after the sexual abuse scandal erupted in Boston and spread nationwide. Catholic leaders point to a sharp decline in new sex abuse allegations -- seven were reported in 2010 -- as evidence that the rules remain effective.

But victims' advocates say reports of ethical lapses by church leaders in Philadelphia and Kansas City, Mo., prove that the nonbinding church policies are weak and rife with loopholes.

"They fall short of having any consequences for bishops' actions," said Mary Dispenza of Bellevue, who said that she was raped by a priest in 1947 in Los Angeles.

Dispenza and several other professed victims protested outside the bishops' hotel and pressed them to adopt guidelines that include penalties for church leaders who break them.

But Cupich said the bishops conference does not have the power to sanction church officials, and that when followed as written, the charter is effective.

"If we look at the cases, it is when the charter was not followed correctly or implemented correctly that we get into difficulty," Cupich said.

Cupich also said that only amendments "seen as strengthening the charter" were accepted by his committee.

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The committee rejected more than 20 amendments proposed by Bishop Fabian Bruskewitz of Lincoln, Neb., who has refused to follow aspects of the charter, such as allowing outside auditors to assess his compliance with church sex abuse rules.

"The USCCB bureaucracy cannot bind bishops to obey the charter," Bruskewitz said. "It is fundamentally dishonest to tell the faithful and the general public that the USCCB has any authority whatsoever to bind dioceses ... to obey the charter. The more commitments, the more grounds for lawsuits."

Archbishop Francis Hurley, former head of the archdiocese of Anchorage, Alaska, argued that church policies aimed at reconciliation should include returning priest-abusers to ministry.

"Don't we believe in forgiveness?" he asked.

Barbara Dorris, outreach director for the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, angrily rejected Hurley's suggestion. "Forgiveness has nothing to do with justice," Dorris said outside the bishops' hotel. "Forgiveness does not stop pedophiles or protect children."

A scathing grand jury report released in February excoriated church leaders in Philadelphia for failing to remove 37 priests who were credibly accused of abuse, withholding information from a lay review board and failing to implement "safe environment" programs in schools -- all breaches of church rules.

Philadelphia Cardinal Justin Rigali will not attend the bishops' meeting outside Seattle, according to a spokeswoman. He is representing the pope at a celebration in the Czech Republic to honor St. John Neumann, a 19th-century archbishop of Philadelphia.

Kansas City Bishop Robert Finn recently apologized for failing to remove a priest from ministry despite a warning from church officials. The priest was arrested in May on child pornography charges. Finn is attending the Seattle meeting.

The U.S. church has spent more than \$2 billion on sex abuse settlements, "safe environment" training for staff, and two sweeping studies that sought to explain the causes and scope of a scandal that has claimed 15,700 victims since 1950.

More coverage from the U.S. bishops' meeting in Bellevue, Wash. June 15-17.

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