

Former diocesan advocate criticizes failed KC system

Joshua J. McElwee | Nov. 8, 2011



Mercy Sr. Jeanne Christensen

KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- "This diocese is in desperate need of healing, and I do not believe that can happen until Bishop [Robert] Finn is held accountable? for his mishandling of clergy sexual misconduct cases, a former victims' advocate for the diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo., said today.

Mercy Sr. Jeanne Christensen, who served as the diocesan victims' advocate from 2000-2004, spoke at a press conference hosted by the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests this afternoon.

Christensen is thought to be the first former diocesan advocate to publicly criticize her diocese over its response to allegations of abuse, according to SNAP members.

Finn and the diocese have been criminally charged with failing to protect children from abuse.

Christensen said Finn did not use diocesan procedures to investigate allegations against Fr. Shawn Ratigan, a diocesan priest arrested in May for possession of child pornography. The diocesan victims' advocate, the immediate response team, and the independent review board, she said, "were in place but not utilized."

"By not doing so, children were placed at risk and were victimized," said Christensen. "This must never happen again."

Allegations of mishandling of clergy sexual misconduct cases have roiled the Catholic church here over recent months. A local prosecutor announced separate charges Oct. 14 against both the diocese and Finn for failing to report suspected child abuse.

The flashpoint has been the response of the diocese to the child pornography case of a local priest. Images of naked children were found on the computer of Fr. Shawn Ratigan in December last year. The Kansas City-St. Joseph diocese learned about the images and removed Ratigan from his parish, but did not report the incident to authorities until May.

While Christensen said in a telephone interview today that "it's not for me to judge" how Finn might be held

responsible, the former advocate suggested others in the hierarchy should ask the bishop to resign.

"Whoever is responsible within the church hierarchy needs to say to Bishop Finn, you're not going to be bishop in Kansas City," she said.

That suggestion by members of the hierarchy, Christensen said, should come about in order to help the Kansas City diocese try to heal.

"[Finn] didn't do what should have been done, and, quite frankly, he's lost credibility with a lot of people," she said. "A lot of people no longer trust him. How are we going to heal our church in that situation? How do we heal in the diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph?"

During the press conference, SNAP also announced a new lawsuit against Fr. Michael Tierney, a diocesan priest who has been the focus of several other lawsuits accusing him of abusing children in the 1970s. Tierney was removed from active ministry in the diocese June 2 after the independent review board met with a person accusing Tierney of abuse and found their testimony credible.

The diocesan spokesperson, Rebecca Summers, said she did not have any immediate comment on Christensen's remarks as the diocese had not been made aware of the press conference or the new suit against Tierney.

SNAP, Summers said, often does not inform the diocese of its press conferences and the diocese "usually doesn't know anything about what the specifics are until someone brings us the suit or let's us know what is going on."

At the press conference, Christensen said she also felt compelled to speak because her experience working as the diocesan advocate gave her a sense of the "anguish caused by abuse." During her time at the diocese under retired Bishop Raymond Boland, who was replaced by Finn in 2005, Christensen said she heard the stories of some 40 victims of abuse.

"I speak because I cannot remain silent but must speak in support of the victim survivors of abuse, for their families and especially for those who are unable or too afraid to speak themselves," she said.

"I urge others to speak out too because we must speak and act for the protection of all children -- so that no more children ever suffer abuse at the hands of the clergy."

After leaving her role as the victims' advocate for the diocese, Christensen continued to serve in the diocesan peace and justice office until 2006.

The charges against the diocese and Finn came from Jackson County, Mo., where the diocesan chancery is located. Ratigan is in jail on charges filed in neighboring Clay County, Mo., where his last parish is located.

Media reports have indicated that a grand jury in that Clay County is also investigating the diocese's response in the case, and has heard testimony from Finn and vicar general Msgr. Robert Murphy.

A federal grand jury charged Ratigan in August with 13 counts of production, attempted production and possession of child pornography.

No matter what happens next in the diocese, Christensen said in the interview her focus is on why the appropriate diocesan procedures for reporting abuse were not followed, and whether children could have been put in danger.

The fact that the advocate, the response team, and the review board were not notified, she said, "is a travesty."

"They were there. There's no reason for those children to have been put at risk."

[Joshua J. McElwee is an *NCR* staff writer. His e-mail address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org.]

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