

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

May 1, 2012 at 9:00am

Editorial: Vigilance on sex abuse must continue

by NCR Staff

Editorial

Publication of the annual audit of dioceses and eparchies to determine how they are complying with the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People is intended to assure the Catholic faithful and the wider society that church leaders remain vigilant in their efforts to combat sex abuse of children by priests and other ministers.

On several levels, the audits, the ninth of which was just released, achieve that purpose. Church leaders are paying more attention than ever before to the protection of children. No other institution in this country has spent as much time or money establishing requirements for education of both children and adults around the topic of sex abuse. The effort has become a model for the church in some other parts of the world and could well become a model for other denominations, not to mention civil entities, such as school systems.

The encouraging news is that the number of reported incidents is diminishing. Some of that certainly is because of the programs put in place since 2002. One might logically conclude that it's also the result of fewer priests and a much different relationship that has evolved between laypeople and priests because of the scandal. Of the 704 allegations of sexual abuse by members of the clergy during the audit period, only 21 involved ?current minors.? The rest were ?historical allegations? first reported in 2011, but occurring in the past and ?often decades ago.? Of the 21 current accusations, the audit states, seven were found to be credible, three were found to be false, three were still under investigation, three were ?unable to be determined,? and five were considered boundary violations, not abuse.

The costs of the scandal are staggering. In 2011 alone, the scandal cost the church \$108,679,706. That amount included settlements with new victims, therapy for victims, support for offenders, attorneys' fees and other costs. The church spent another \$32.7 million in 2011 on child protection efforts. Since 2004,

according to the audit report, the combined amount spent by dioceses, eparchies and religious orders on costs related to the scandal is \$2.48 billion. And that doesn't include the costs incurred since the scandal was first reported nationally in 1985. At that time, dioceses had already begun to agree to millions of dollars in secret payments to victims. The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate said no one has a tally for those years.

While the audits represent a degree of transparency and accountability that Catholics of previous eras could hardly have imagined, the surveys also have serious limits. At the outset, the report notes that two dioceses -- Baker, Ore., and Lincoln, Neb. -- and six of the 32 eparchies, or dioceses of the Eastern church, refused to cooperate with the audits. They were thus labeled out of compliance. That designation is the extent of the consequences for not complying. The audit is voluntary, and we're grateful that most dioceses take it seriously. But we are aware that individual bishops can brush off the audit or components of it without fear of consequences.

Further, no matter how diligent the auditors (in this three-year cycle, one-third of the dioceses each year receive an on-site visit, while the others are audited at a distance), the entire procedure depends on self-reporting by the dioceses. In other words, the most important information comes from files over which only those being audited have control.

In reality, whenever the legal process has intervened and demanded documentation, the numbers almost invariably turn out to be greater than those advanced voluntarily by church leaders.

Stunning examples of that flaw were revealed in 2011, first in Philadelphia, where a second, devastating grand jury report found a number of priests who had been credibly accused but whose cases had never gone before the review board and who had not been taken out of ministry.

Currently, the former Philadelphia archdiocese official in charge of transferring priests is on trial for child endangerment. It was revealed, as part of the court proceedings, that the late Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua had ordered subordinates to shred a list of 35 priests accused of abuse.

A second example of the flaws in the system occurred last year in Kansas City, Mo., where Bishop Robert Finn failed to report a priest who was suspected of having child pornography on his computer and of having taken inappropriate photographs of children. Finn is facing a criminal trial on misdemeanor child endangerment charges (**see story**).

The current audit report mentions none of that.

The report's detached recitation of data paints a certain statistical reality. What it doesn't contain, however, may be at least as important as what's there.

Advertisement

The report itself warns of "a growing complacency" in the dioceses. In his preface to the report, New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, notes that while the current audit supports the conclusions of earlier studies done by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice "that the majority of allegations are way in the past -- the church must continue to be vigilant."

Indeed, and that especially goes for lay Catholics.

Never again should laity grant the benefit of the doubt to a member of the clergy when there is a question

of abuse or other evil simply because that person happens to occupy an office. Respect for the ordained priesthood does not mean unthinking deference. Authority doesn't occur magically. It is something earned, and trust, not fear, is an essential ingredient of any healthy authority.

Never again should laypeople ascribe such superhuman qualities to ordained men as to set them automatically above reproach or question. The clerical culture can't have it both ways, at once declaring such a difference in station and "ontological" makeup as to be above the normal fray of humankind, yet begging to be perceived as simply human when the inevitable failure occurs.

Never again should laypeople ignore the claims and pleas of their children, presuming that someone ordained to noble calling could not engage in horrific behavior.

Finally, all Catholics must remember that none of the steps taken to deal with the crisis occurred voluntarily on the part of the bishops. The charter, the national offices set up for the protection of children, the studies portraying a disturbing picture of episcopal failure, the national and diocesan review boards -- none of that would have occurred except for public pressure brought by victims and their lawyers and local prosecutors.

We appreciate the show of the hierarchy's ongoing diligence that the annual audits represent. It is a step toward re-establishing trust with the rest of the church. At the same time, we encourage the church at large to remain vigilant, aware that none of the men whose decisions over decades led to the enormity of this crisis was ever held accountable for his actions nor for the resulting costs to the church and the victims.

Source URL (retrieved on 03/23/2018 - 5:54pm): <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/editorial-vigilance-sex-abuse-must-continue>

Links:

[1] <https://www.ncronline.org/forward/join?clickSource=end-article>

[2] <https://www.ncronline.org/node/160616>