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Decision coming on suspended Philly priests

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NCR Today

Multiple reports say a decision will come Friday regarding the 27 Philadelphia archdiocese priests suspended over allegations of sexual abuse or misconduct.

A source indicated to the Philadelphia Inquirer that Archbishop Charles Chaput will make an announcement tomorrow on their fates. Yesterday, priests were invited to a meeting at Cardinal O'Hara High School, in Springfield, Pa., where it was believed the status of the suspended priests was discussed.

Several Philadelphia priests contacted by *NCR* declined comment on the substance of the topics discussed at the meeting.

The suspensions occurred at the hand of former archbishop Cardinal Justin Rigali, after a February 2011 grand jury report criticized the archdiocese for allowing dozens of priests to remain in ministry despite having standing allegations of sexual impropriety against them.

On March 8, 2011, Rigali suspended 21 priests, with six more suspended in the following days. To re-examine the accusations against them, the archdiocese hired a former child abuse prosecutor, Gina Maisto Smith, to head the investigation.

In a March 8 column this year, Chaput indicated a conclusion was near for the priests whose status has remained in limbo for more than a year.

"I can't conclude this column without noting that one item — a very painful one — remains a source of great frustration for our priests, our people and for me. More than two dozen of my brother priests who were placed on leave in the wake of last year's grand jury report remain on administrative leave. On several different occasions, our priests have heard that these cases would end 'soon,'" he wrote.

"Justice requires a resolution of these men's circumstances," Chaput said, indicating he hoped the cases could be completed over the next eight weeks.

Today marks that eight-week mark.

The 2011 grand jury said it was appalled of the 41 priests "who have remained in active ministry in the past five years after the Archdiocese learned of accusations or reports of their inappropriate behavior or sexual abuse of minors."

Of the priests accused since 2005 and remaining in their assignments after the allegations surfaced, four had since died, been transferred or removed, bringing the number down to 37.

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"We would have assumed, by the year 2011, after all the revelations both here and around the world, that the church would not risk its youth by leaving them in the presence of priests subject to substantial evidence of abuse. That is not the case," the grand jury wrote.

"We understand that accusations are not proof; but we just cannot understand the Archdiocese's apparent absence of any sense of urgency," read the report, adding "These are simply not the actions of an institution that is serious about ending sexual abuse of its children. There is no other conclusion."

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