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Catholic bishops told to follow their own policies against sexual abuse

David Gibson Religion News Service | Jun. 13, 2012

Amid continuing headlines about cover-ups of child abuse in the Catholic Church, an oversight board of lay Catholics on Wednesday (June 13) warned the nation's bishops that they must follow their own policies against abuse more rigorously if they hope to restore their fragile credibility.

"If there is anything that needs to be disclosed in a diocese, it needs to be disclosed now," Al J. Notzon III, head of the bishops' National Review Board, told some 200 prelates gathered in Atlanta for their annual spring meeting. "No one can no longer claim they didn't know."

The meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops comes 10 years after the hierarchy met in Dallas and passed a series of reforms to respond to a siege of bad publicity about sex abuse by priests. It also comes as a jury in Philadelphia weighs the fate of a high-ranking priest who's facing criminal charges of concealing abuse by clerics, and as a bishop from Missouri awaits trial on charges that he failed to report a suspected child molester to authorities.

In his review of the church's track record over the past decade, Notzon did not mention the Philadelphia or Missouri cases by name, nor any of the other periodic lapses by bishops over the 10 years since the USCCB passed the so-called Dallas Charter.

While the charter called for punishing priests with a one-strike policy and instituted programs to safeguard children in Catholic parishes and schools, it did not provide any mechanism for disciplining bishops who flout the charter's provisions.

Because only the pope himself has the power to discipline a bishop, Notzon was left with the only tool he has available: moral suasion and public pressure.

"Now is not the time to drift away from the moral requirements of the Charter and the legal requirements of reporting," said Notzon, former head of a Texas association of local governments. He was speaking on behalf of the entire 16-member board of law enforcement officials, academics, psychologists and others with experience in institutional management.

"Children must be protected," he said. "Bishops must continue to work toward restoring the trust of the faithful. Only when bishops are seen as following through on their promise to protect and pledge to heal will the faithful begin to trust them to take care of their most precious gift -- their children."

Over the past decade, there have been periodic lapses by bishops who kept allegations against priests secret, rejected the recommendations of diocesan review boards or simply withheld allegations from their local review boards. Those failures and a lack of accountability for the bishops' have fueled ongoing skepticism about the hierarchy's commitment to child protection.

Apart from that challenge, Notzon's assessment was largely positive as he surveyed the results of reforms over

the past 10 years.

New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, president of the USCCB, thanked Notzon for "challenging us to keep up the good work." Other bishops expressed concerns that the public did not appreciate how much they had done, and that the penalties for priests in the charter may undermine clerical identity.

Advocates for victims were more pointed in their assessment of Wednesday's report. Anne Barrett Doyle, co-director of BishopAccountability.org, which archives data on the abuse scandal, called the NRB report "gutless."

"The last thing bishops need is more flattery," Doyle said. "They need a tough national review board and tough diocesan review boards to challenge them on their continued dangerous practices."

The bishops also spent the first day of their three-day meeting -- the only full day that was open to the media -- girding for their ongoing battle to try to change or overturn the Obama administration's requirement that health insurance policies provide cost-free birth control coverage.

The bishops have been at the forefront of opposition to the contraception mandate, and they have framed the issue as a fight for "religious freedom" rather than an effort to impose the church's opposition to birth control. The bishops also see religious freedom as a model for pursuing other fronts in the culture wars, including gay marriage and abortion.

The bishops have had some difficulty gaining traction on the issue with the public, however, and are trying to drum up support for their "Fortnight for Freedom" campaign -- a two-week stretch of services and events that starts June 21 and ends on July 4, Independence Day.

While the hierarchy was united behind their religious liberty campaign, the bishops appeared much less certain about tackling a statement on the economy -- the issue that is far more likely to determine the outcome of November's presidential contest.

Bishop Stephen E. Blaire of Stockton, Calif., the bishops' point man on social justice issues, asked the conference to approve the drafting of a statement on the economy that he called "timely, if not overdue."

"It has been a long time since the body of bishops has addressed the moral and human dimensions of economic life in light of Catholic teaching," Blaire said. "This is especially urgent when so many of our people are suffering and wonder whether their church cares and has anything to say about their situation and the economy that has left them behind."

A number of bishops -- reflecting the increasingly conservative slant of the USCCB -- raised concerns that such a document could be seen as implicitly criticizing Republican budget policies and could be seen as too political.

In the end, the bishops voted 171-26 to draft a message, tentatively titled "Catholic Reflections on Work, Poverty and a Broken Economy," and scheduled for debate and release a week after the November elections.

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