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USCCB's clergy sex abuse audit finds decline but 'major' limitations

by Joshua J. McElwee

Washington — The yearly audit of U.S. Catholic dioceses' compliance with national measures to report and prevent clergy sexual abuse found a decline in the number of reported cases of abuse from July 2012 to June 2013 but also cited concerns about the limited scope of the auditors' abilities.

Of particular concern are four dioceses that would not allow any audits to take place and the fact that "most" dioceses do not allow or conduct audits of parishes or schools, where most reporting of abuse is thought to occur, the auditors write.

During the finding period -- July 1, 2012, through June 30, 2013 -- 857 survivors of clergy sexual abuse reported 936 allegations of abuse in 191 dioceses, the audit reports, a decline from the 921 survivors who reported abuse in the previous audit period.

In the recent report, 472 allegations were deemed by the audit "unable to be proven"; 223 had an investigation ongoing; 136 were deemed "substantiated"; 78 "unsubstantiated"; and 27 had not yet been investigated. Abuse allegations were dated from the 1920s to the present.

The yearly audit for abuse reporting was released Friday by the U.S. bishops' conference. It includes reports on the matter from the national firm conducting the audits, the bishops' Secretariat for Child and Youth Protection, and the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), an institute at Georgetown University that conducts annual surveys of the dioceses separate from the audit.

The bishops' conference is mandated to conduct the audit under their "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People," adopted in 2002 following explosive press coverage of clergy sexual abuse cases. Bishops, while strongly encouraged to participate, cannot be required to do so as national

conferences are not granted oversight authority of individual bishops by the Vatican or the church's canon law.

That limitation is mentioned several times by the auditors and in the other reports, which specify repeatedly that the diocese of Lincoln, Neb., continues to be the only U.S. diocese that refuses to allow auditing. That diocese is therefore found by the auditors to be in noncompliance with the charter.

Three eparchies -- dioceses of Eastern-rite Catholic churches -- also refused auditing and also were found noncompliant. The eparchies are the Chaldean Eparchy of Saint Peter the Apostle of San Diego, the Eparchy of Our Lady of Nareg in New York for Armenian Catholics and the Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy of Stamford.

The reports do not mention the two clergy sexual abuse cases that garnered the most attention in the last year: In St. Paul, Minn., where an archdiocesan chancellor resigned in April 2013 saying allegations went unreported in the diocese; and in Newark, N.J., where an archdiocesan priest was arrested in May 2013 for maintaining contact with children despite a court agreement not to do so.

Deacon Bernie Nojadera, the executive director of the bishops' Secretariat for Child and Youth Protection, said in a phone interview Monday that the auditors investigated the situation in the Newark archdiocese but found the archdiocese in compliance with the charter.

"According to what [the auditing service] had provided to us in terms of the audit, all of the procedures were followed per their [arch]diocesan policies," said Nojadera, who said he did not have the specific reports from Newark at hand during the conversation.

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The Newark archdiocese staff, he said, were "following their protocol, their procedures and in fact from what I understand went beyond even what was being prescribed by Rome."

StoneBridge Business Partners, a national auditing service based in Rochester, N.Y., conducted the audits. The U.S. bishops contracted StoneBridge in 2010 to conduct a three-year cycle of audits of U.S. dioceses from 2011 to 2013.

According to auditors' reports, StoneBridge staff visited 64 dioceses or eparchies in 2013 and collected data from another 127.

In their report, the auditors cite four "major" limitations to the scope of their audits: lack of auditing at the parish level, "inconsistent" methods for collecting statistics across dioceses nationwide; turnover in positions at diocesan offices; and the refusal of the four dioceses and eparchies to participate.

Regarding the first area, StoneBridge said "most dioceses and all eparchies" did not allow its staff to conduct audits at the parish level.

"Parishes and schools represent the front lines in any diocese's or eparchy's Charter compliance efforts," StoneBridge wrote in its report. "If a diocese or eparchy does not conduct some form of audit of its parishes and schools ... the bishop or eparch cannot be sure that Charter-related policies and procedures are clearly communicated and effectively carried out."

"At the chancery or pastoral center, our auditors may review certain Charter implementation policies ...

but without observing the same procedures at the parish/school level, we are unable to verify that parishes and schools are complying with the Charter," it states.

Nojadera said in his interview that he wants to work toward a future where diocesan staffs have "complete confidence" in how to handle a report of sexual abuse in their dioceses and know how to follow procedure using "muscle memory."

"In the end, it's just the idea of working towards this conscious state of awareness," he said. "It's more in line with a movement towards a cultural change, an attitude change with how we deal with the issue of child abuse, child sexual abuse, or abuse in general."

The issue of whether dioceses allow parish or school audits are not the purview of the national conference, Nojadera said.

"We can encourage bishops to use that option," he said. "But that's still the purview and the decision and the choice of the bishop to do that."

Later in the report, StoneBridge states that another issue it found is a lack of procedure for diocesan review boards, confidential consultative bodies each bishop is to have for getting advice and direction on sexual abuse cases.

While all dioceses taking part in the audit had a review board, "the frequency with which each review board meets varies," StoneBridge states.

Three eparchies and two dioceses were found noncompliant by the auditors with the portion of the charter regarding the review board system because their boards had not met in several years. Those dioceses -- including Lexington, Ky., and Alexandria, Va. -- have since committed to convene their boards, the auditors state.

Auditors, the reports states, also provided comment to 30 bishops who had not updated their diocesan procedures to reflect a 2011 revision of the charter that updated its definition of "sexual abuse" to include "the acquisition, possession, or distribution by a cleric of child pornography."

The separate report from CARA, which allowed dioceses to respond to an online survey regarding their responses to abuse allegations, covers calendar year 2013.

In that survey, which also did not include the Lincoln diocese, CARA says 370 "new credible allegations" were reported against diocesan clergy in 2013.

The CARA survey states that 365 individuals made reports against 290 priests or deacons. Nine allegations involved children under the age of 18 in 2013; the remaining were from adults alleging abuse as minors.

Five allegations involved solely child pornography, CARA states. The dioceses reported total payout costs to survivors in 2013 of some \$109 million.

Ninety-four new allegations were made against clergy in religious orders or institutes, with one involving a child under the age of 18 in 2013, according to the CARA report. No allegations for the religious orders involved solely child pornography, and the institutes reported paying out some \$14.5 million to survivors in 2013.

The new CARA report also provides yearly totals for the number of allegations made against male clergy

in dioceses and religious orders between 2004 and 2013 as reported by dioceses and orders. According to those numbers, 6,630 allegations were made against clergy in that timeframe from 6,577 victims.

The sum total of all costs paid by dioceses and religious institutes in the same period -- including settlements, therapy for victims, support for offenders, attorney fees and other costs -- comes to approximately \$2.74 billion, according to the CARA report.

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