NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Bishops talk sex abuse complacency, not accountability at annual meeting

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USCCB Summer 2014
New Orleans

Urged not to get complacent on clergy sexual abuse of minors, the nation's Catholic bishops spoke little of holding one another accountable for failures in protecting children at their annual spring meeting.

The chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' National Review Board, which advises the bishops on child protection policies, told those gathered Wednesday in New Orleans that the church "continues to slowly make progress" on the abuse issue and asked bishops present to "resist complacency" and "remain committed" to the work still ahead of them.

"Every time we learn about a situation that results from a decision not in conformity with the Charter [for the Protection of Children and Young People], the commendable efforts of the bishops to address the issue of sexual abuse are compromised," Francesco Cesareo said. "These instances further erode the credibility of the bishops."

Toward the end of his 20-minute address, Cesareo said Catholics must "hold each other accountable for any actions or decisions that run contrary" to the prelates' charter, which the bishops' conference adopted in 2002. However, Cesareo did not specify who needs to be held accountable and to whom.

The topic received no wider discussion in the general sessions Wednesday, with retired Erie, Pa., Bishop Donald Trautman posing the only question on the subject from the floor: "Are we able to say that all dioceses and eparchies are implementing the charter?"

"We are not able to say that," replied Cesareo, mentioning that one diocese (Lincoln, Neb.) and three eparchies, the term for dioceses of Eastern rite Catholics, have yet to submit to auditing of their procedures to protect children as prescribed under the 2002 charter.

Despite the lack of discussion in New Orleans, the days and weeks that preceded the bishops' meeting provided plenty to animate Cesareo's charge. Aboard the papal plane on his return from the Holy Land in May, Pope Francis told journalists [1] that the Vatican is currently investigating three bishops for misconduct regarding clergy sexual abuse, with one already found guilty and awaiting punishment.

Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley, one of eight cardinals advising the pope on reforming the Catholic church who also serves on a new papal commission on abuse, has also addressed repeatedly in recent months [2] the need to make bishops accountable for their actions on sexual abuse.

Terence McKiernan, head of a nonprofit that documents the church's response to sexual abuse, said Wednesday that Cesareo's presentation was "not adequate to the dire situation in which the USCCB finds itself." He singled out abuse scandals in Kansas City, Mo. [3], Milwaukee [4] and St. Paul-Minneapolis [5] as placing "in crisis"

positive developments made so far. He said the bishops should vote to censure bishops in these dioceses.

"Though Cesareo warns against complacency, he finds it impossible to press the bishops on the most urgent issue -- their own performance," said McKiernan, president and co-director of BishopAccountability.org [6]. "This is a time for substantive action, not business as usual."

At the bishops' meeting, Cesareo urged the prelates to participate in an ongoing revision process of the 2002 charter, to share best practices with one another, and to assess the effectiveness of annual audit of sexual abuse procedures carried out in dioceses across the country.

Cesareo also asked that more dioceses include parish audits as part of the audit process, something 26 additional dioceses elected to do in the previous audit cycle.

Among the hundreds of prelates listening to Cesareo's message in the hotel ballroom Wednesday? St. Paul-Minneapolis Archbishop John Nienstedt and Kansas City Bishop Robert Finn.

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