

Archbishop Lori adds details on Bishop Bransfield investigation

Editor's note: Updated June 6, 9:30 a.m. with new information in paragraphs 8-14.

Archbishop William E. Lori of Baltimore released additional details June 5 about the investigation into allegations of sexual misconduct and financial improprieties against Bishop Michael J. Bransfield, former bishop of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, W.Va.

In a letter to the faithful, Archbishop Lori, who was appointed apostolic administrator of the diocese last September, said that he wanted to more fully share information about the investigation the Vatican asked him to conduct into Bishop Bransfield's activities, the report of which was sent to the Holy See in March.

"Regarding allegations of sexual harassment of adults by Bishop Bransfield, the investigative team determined that the accounts of those who accused Bishop Bransfield of sexual harassment are credible," Archbishop Lori said in the letter. "The team uncovered a consistent pattern of sexual innuendo, and overt suggestive comments and actions toward those over whom the former bishop exercised authority."

He noted that the investigation did not uncover sexual abuse of minors by the bishop.

"Without a doubt, the alleged victims of former Bishop Bransfield's sexual harassment must be our first and constant concern. Thus, the diocese has committed to providing counseling to them and to all priests and lay personnel at the chancery. ... For known victims, the diocese will commit to reimbursing the costs for mental

health assistance for a provider of their choosing,” Archbishop Lori said.

The letter to the faithful also noted that the investigation revealed “a pattern of excessive and inappropriate spending,” including extensive renovations to Bishop Bransfield’s homes, and that the bishop misused diocesan funds for personal benefit for travel, dining, gifts and luxury items.

Archbishop Lori noted that he was among those who received gifts from the bishop, totaling \$7,500, which he said he was returning to the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston with the request that it be used for Catholic Charities.

The Washington Post reported June 5 that, based on an early draft of the report and the final report, copies of both of which the Post had obtained, Archbishop Lori had received \$10,500 from Bishop Bransfield.

Sean Caine, executive director of communications for the archdiocese, explained that \$3,000 of that was travel expenses and honoraria for the archbishop preaching at two Red Masses in the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, an annual event to pray for those in the judicial and legislative branches.

The Post also reported that the names of individual clerics who had received cash gifts from Bishop Bransfield over the years were deleted from the final report.

Archbishop Lori said, “By deleting the reference to specific individuals who received gifts, and just noting the totals with a separate list of the recipients, the thinking was that by selecting particular individuals to identify who received gifts is a distraction and raises questions as to why we selected some individuals and not others.

“The point we tried to make in the report is that the gift-giving was part of Bishop Bransfield’s excessive spending, which we can make by indicating the totals,” he

said.

Caine noted that none of the investigating team had objected to that strategy at the time. He said Archbishop Lori acknowledges that in hindsight, he can see how not sharing this information could be seen as protecting those whose judgment could have been compromised by such gifts and that if he had it to do over again the report would have included the names of those clerics who received gifts, including his own, with some notation that there was no evidence found to suggest those who received gifts reciprocated in any way that was inappropriate.

“He has since sent the list of names of those bishops who received gifts to the Holy See,” Caine said.

Archbishop Lori said he was working with diocesan leadership and the Finance Council to put in place better safeguards. “Clearly, despite proper checks and balances, diocesan policies and oversight procedures were subverted and we are determined to prevent this type of lapse from occurring in the future,” the archbishop said.

He also said he would immediately list for sale the bishop’s residence, which had been used by four bishops of the diocese since 1963.

“I am deeply pained by and sorry for the harm that the former bishop caused to those he was charged with shepherding in a spirit of Christ-like humility, service and pastoral care and charity,” Archbishop Lori said. “We are committed to bringing about the healing that the good people of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston require and can only pray for and work relentlessly to regain their renewed trust and confidence.”

The full text of Archbishop Lori’s letter follows:

June 5, 2019

Memorial of St. Boniface, bishop and martyr

To the Priests and Lay Faithful of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston,

As you know, last September, upon the Holy Father's acceptance of the resignation of former Wheeling-Charleston Bishop Michael J. Bransfield, I was appointed by the Holy See to serve as Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese and assigned to commission a preliminary investigation into allegations of sexual harassment of adults and financial improprieties committed by the former bishop. In March, at the time of the investigation's conclusion, I reported to you that I appointed five lay investigators - both Catholic and non-Catholic alike - with professional competency in civil law, finance, human resources, and canon law, to conduct the investigation. Their work occurred over a five-month period and included interviews with dozens of individuals who had worked closely with the former bishop and interacted with him in a variety of ways, and whose knowledge and perspective would inform the findings. As I shared with you two months ago, I submitted the preliminary investigation to the Holy See for final judgment and suspended Bishop Bransfield's priestly and episcopal faculties within the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston and the Archdiocese of Baltimore, as was my prerogative to do so as the Metropolitan Archbishop and as the Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston.

Since last communicating with you about this troubling matter, I have sought to address the findings of the investigation and to continue to be pastorally present to the faithful of the Diocese as often as has been possible. In the spirit of transparency and based on my many conversations during various visits to the Diocese these past months, it is clear to me that more must be said about the report's findings and about the steps being taken to address them.

Regarding allegations of sexual harassment of adults by Bishop Bransfield, the investigative team determined that the accounts of those who accused Bishop Bransfield of sexual harassment are credible. The team uncovered a consistent pattern of sexual innuendo, and overt suggestive comments and actions toward those over whom the former bishop exercised authority. The investigation found no conclusive evidence of sexual misconduct with minors by the former bishop during its investigation. It should be noted that due to privacy concerns and at the request of those who alleged harassment by Bishop Bransfield, the alleged victims and their personal accounts, which for them are a source of deeply-felt pain and humiliation, will not be disclosed by the Diocese.

Without a doubt, the alleged victims of former Bishop Bransfield's sexual harassment must be our first and constant concern. Thus, the Diocese has committed to providing counseling to them and to all priests and lay personnel at the Chancery. I have asked that a permanent program be developed and advertised to seminarians and priests that such services are available. For known victims, the Diocese will commit to reimbursing the costs for mental health assistance for a provider of their choosing. Further, I have mandated that a third-party reporting system for any allegation against a bishop of the Diocese be implemented. This is in process and will soon be launched, allowing also for anonymous complaints to be made. Modeled after a program I instituted in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, the system uses a third-party vendor to receive and direct such reports to members of the lay-led Independent Review Board for reporting of any financial impropriety, sexual abuse or harassment to the appropriate civil and Church authorities.

Among the financial improprieties cited, the investigative report determined that during his tenure as Bishop of Wheeling-Charleston, Bishop Bransfield engaged in a pattern of excessive and inappropriate spending. The investigation found that Bishop Bransfield initiated and completed extensive and expensive renovations to his

private residences in both Wheeling and Charleston, as well as his intended retirement residence, the construction of which was halted at my request at the time of my appointment as Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese. The investigation further found that Bishop Bransfield misused Church funds for personal benefit on such things as personal travel, dining, liquor, gifts and luxury items.

As we seek to understand how such behavior was able to occur over the course of Bishop Bransfield's 13-year-long tenure, it is evident from those who spoke with investigators that the Bishop's management style and personality undermined the effectiveness of diocesan policies, controls and oversight procedures. In some cases, it is apparent that the judgment of diocesan personnel was impacted by the culture of fear of retaliation and retribution that the former bishop fostered.

I have been in close collaboration with the leadership of the Diocese, including members of the Diocesan Finance Council, to identify how best to prevent such behaviors from occurring in the future. Clearly, despite proper checks and balances, diocesan policies and oversight procedures were subverted and we are determined to prevent this type of lapse from occurring in the future.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I feel it necessary to acknowledge that I was periodically a recipient of financial gifts in varying amounts by Bishop Bransfield for various occasions over the years, including my installation as Archbishop of Baltimore in 2012 and annually at Christmas. These gifts totaled \$7,500. In light of what I have come to learn of Bishop Bransfield's handling of diocesan finances, I have returned the full amount to the Diocese and have asked that it be donated to Catholic Charities.

Finally, I have made the determination in my role as Apostolic Administrator to immediately list for sale the Wheeling-Charleston bishop's residence. Built between 1908 and 1910, and located in the Parkview/Elm Grove section of Wheeling, the

home originally belonged to William E. Weiss, a founder of Sterling Drug Co., formerly one of the largest patent drug firms in the United States. The home, replete with many original furnishings, was purchased from Linsly Institute in 1963 for \$63,000.00 by the late Bishop Joseph H. Hodges and has served since that time as the residence of four bishops of Wheeling-Charleston. It will serve this purpose no longer.

I am deeply pained by and sorry for the harm that the former bishop caused to those he was charged with shepherding in a spirit of Christ-like humility, service and pastoral care and charity. There is no excuse, nor adequate explanation, that will satisfy the troubling question of how his behavior was allowed to continue for as long as it did without the accountability that we must require of those who have been entrusted with so much - both spiritual and material - as bishops and pastors. This is a critical issue our Church is presently committed to addressing once and for all, guided by the leadership of Pope Francis and his recent Motu Proprio. We are committed to bringing about the healing that the good people of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston require and can only pray for and work relentlessly to regain their renewed trust and confidence.

Faithfully in Christ,

Most Reverend William E. Lori

Apostolic Administrator, Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston

Archbishop of Baltimore

Also see:

[Archbishop Lori addresses release of report on Bishop Michael Bransfield](#)

[Q&A on Bishop Bransfield report](#)