

Archdiocesan leaders respond to pope's reforms on accountability

Baltimore Archbishop William E. Lori welcomed Pope Francis' May 9 document clarifying and revising norms and procedures for holding bishops and religious superiors accountable in protecting minors as well as in protecting members of religious orders and seminarians from abuse.

"I welcome his *motu proprio*, 'Vos Estis Lux Mundi' ('You Are the Light of the World'), which creates new church law establishing uniform and universal requirements for allegations of child sexual abuse, as well as for those who abuse their authority, including bishops," Archbishop Lori said.

The new juridical instrument - issued by the pope "*motu proprio*" (on his own authority) - is meant to help bishops and religious leaders around the world clearly understand their duties and church law, underlining how they are ultimately responsible for proper governance and protecting those entrusted to their care. For this reason, the new document establishes a clearer set of universal procedures for reporting suspected abuse, carrying out initial investigations and protecting victims and whistleblowers.

"The crimes of sexual abuse offend Our Lord, cause physical, psychological and spiritual damage to the victims, and harm the community of the faithful," the pope said in the document, released by the Vatican May 9. The norms become law for the church June 1, but national bishops conferences have a year from that date to put appropriate systems into place.

"Today's announcement from Rome sends a clear and unequivocal message that Pope Francis has heard the voices of Catholics and others throughout the world, ensuring that the church will not tolerate any behavior that threatens to harm another, regardless of position or rank," the archbishop said.

"I am especially grateful that the norms are very much aligned with the considerable feedback I have received from the faithful of the Archdiocese of Baltimore over the

past nine months.”

He added that he is particularly heartened that the pope addressed not only the sexual abuse of children but also emphasized “the handling of allegations of those who abuse vulnerable adults and on allegations of sexual abuse through intimidation and coercion by those in positions of authority.”

The archbishop noted that the new norms from the Vatican call for the creation of a reporting system for allegations against bishops, a version of which was implemented in the Archdiocese of Baltimore in January, and is believed to be the first such system in the country. Similar models have since been implemented in Boston and in Wheeling-Charleston, W.Va. Archbishop Lori is apostolic administrator of that diocese.

Covered under that initiative are procedures to address potential allegations that a bishop of the archdiocese:

- engaged in child sexual abuse or other inappropriate sexual behavior with a minor;
- engaged in sexual harassment or misconduct toward an adult; or
- engaged in activities that constitute seriously negligent supervision or an improper cover-up relating to alleged child sexual abuse by others within the archdiocese.

This new initiative from the Independent Review Board provides a method to ensure proper reporting of allegations against a bishop, at first, to two members of the board who are both retired judges, Joseph F. Murphy and Ellen M. Heller. Neither is employed by, is a volunteer or is in any other position within the archdiocese.

Archbishop Lori said he looks forward to a planned meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore in June at which the bishops will “discuss the timely implementation of these important and essential safeguards that will strengthen our longstanding policies, such as zero-tolerance.”

“As church leaders continue on the path of repentance, reform and renewal for our entire church,” the archbishop said, “we must continue to remain vigilant and to seek new ways of advancing transparency, accountability and healing for those

harmed by members of the church.”

Auxiliary Bishop Adam J. Parker, moderator of the curia and the leader of the archdiocese’s child protection team, said that the archdiocese is likely already in compliance with the new global norms.

“Happily, we have made considerable progress already with regard to these norms,” he said.

For example, he said, the new norms call for a mechanism for a report to be made to an independent body, “and we have that.”

“It’s a very hopeful moment for us collectively – the bishops, the priests and the lay faithful here in the archdiocese – that the pope has heard (the concerns) and has spoken.”

The archdiocese conducted 18 listening sessions about the abuse crisis last fall, with the archbishop present at 12 of them; Bishop Parker was at all 18. Information from those was brought to the bishops’ meeting in November, and from there, Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo, USCCB president, brought the U.S. concerns to a Vatican summit on the topic. “It’s fair to say that the voices of our faithful here in the archdiocese and across the country were heard and conveyed to the Holy Father,” Bishop Parker said.

He said the U.S. bishops will look at four major documents or initiatives at the June meeting, some of which were tabled at the request of the Vatican in November.

“The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops will want to flesh out the mechanics behind the third-party reporting mechanism. I suspect whatever those mechanics are, it’s going to resemble very closely – if not exactly – what we have here in Baltimore,” the bishop said.

“To that end, I don’t think we’re going to need to modify what is now in place here in the archdiocese.”

Although he said he would have to confirm whether the archdiocese’s current human resources and child protection policies have the kind of whistleblower

protections called for by the new norms, “I think we’re in compliance at the local level. I don’t think it will be that much of a leap to implement it on the national level,” Bishop Parker said.

He said the mechanism detailed in the norms for investigating a bishop accused of sexual abuse of a child or other misconduct or negligence looks very much like the process by which Archbishop Lori was mandated by Pope Francis in 2018 to investigate allegations against Bishop Michael J. Bransfield of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston. Leadership at the Vatican would have been aware of the process Archbishop Lori was working on there.

It is possible that the Vatican leadership who helped the pope draft the new norms had already been formulating such a plan and the pope used it in Wheeling-Charleston as a test case, or that the way that process was carried out made it a good example to use globally.

“It certainly looks so much like that investigation that one may conclude that there was influence of the process that was being undertaken here,” Bishop Parker said.

He said a guidebook on how to conduct such investigations will be needed on the national level for consistency when such cases come up.

The United States was at the forefront worldwide in dealing with the issue of child sexual abuse in the church, with passage in 2002 of the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People and its accompanying norms. “That was a significant leap forward, and this (the pope’s *motu proprio*) is yet another leap forward,” he said.

“The number of people I encountered at listening sessions wanted action from the top – from the Vatican. Today, we have seen that action,” Bishop Parker said. “Our pope is affirming what we are doing here.”

He said it is extremely helpful for these new norms to be issued prior to the USCCB meeting in June, because it provides a framework for action that the conference was already considering and indicates that the Vatican is likely to approve implementation steps the bishops approve.

Contributing to this story was Carol Glatz of Catholic News Service in Rome.

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