

Bishop Finn, diocese plead not guilty to failure to report child abuse

KANSAS CITY, Mo. – Bishop Robert W. Finn and the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, which he heads, entered pleas of not guilty to misdemeanor charges of failure to report child abuse.

The charges, brought by Jackson County Prosecutor Jean Peters Baker in relation to the diocese's handling of the case of Father Shawn Ratigan, were acknowledged in an Oct. 14 statement on the diocesan website.

"Bishop Finn denies any criminal wrongdoing and has cooperated at all stages with law enforcement, the grand jury, the prosecutor's office" and the independent commission appointed by the diocese to study the matter, said Gerald Handley, the bishop's attorney. "We will continue our efforts to resolve this matter."

Bishop Finn said in a statement after diocesan attorneys entered the pleas in court that he "will meet these announcements with a steady resolve and a vigorous defense."

The charge against Bishop Finn carries a maximum penalty of a \$1,000 fine and one year in jail. The diocese faces a fine of up to \$5,000.

Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, had no comment on the indictment. The diocese had no further comment.

Father Ratigan was arrested in May on state charges of possessing child pornography. In August, federal prosecutors charged him with producing child pornography. The priest, a former pastor, also is facing accusations made against him in two separate lawsuits filed this summer.

The Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph and Bishop Finn also have been named in the civil suits, which accuse both of failing to keep Father Ratigan away from children

apparently after learning disturbing images were found on the priest's computer and being warned of the priest's inappropriate behavior around children.

In early September, an independent report commissioned by the diocese to examine its policies and procedures on assessing child sexual abuse allegations found "shortcomings, inaction and confusing procedures."

The report also said that "diocesan leaders failed to follow their own policies and procedures for responding to reports" relating to abuse claims.

After the priest's arrest, Bishop Finn pledged to cooperate with law enforcement authorities and Baker credited him for that during a news conference announcing the indictments. The grand jury handed down the indictments Oct. 6, but they were not made public because Bishop Finn was traveling outside of the country and did not return until late on Oct. 13, Baker said.

Bishop Finn testified before the grand jury Sept. 16. Afterward, he told reporters, "We're doing the best we can to cooperate with law enforcement."

Several other diocesan leaders, including diocesan spokeswoman Rebecca Summers, also testified before the grand jury, the Kansas City Star daily newspaper reported.

In the diocesan statement, Bishop Finn said that once the situation with Father Ratigan arose, the diocese began to "address the issues that led to this crisis." He pointed to steps to reinforce and expand diocesan procedures regarding the reporting of child sex abuse. He also appointed an ombudsman charged with having "the responsibility and authority to receive and investigate reports of suspicious, inappropriate behavior or sexual misconduct by clergy, employees or program volunteers."

A separate vicar for clergy, Father Jerome Powers, also was appointed. The role previously had been part of the vicar general's responsibilities.

Bishop Finn also asked for prayers for himself and the diocese as well as for the "unity of our priests, our people, the parishes, and the Catholic institutions."

"With deep faith, we will weather this storm and never cease to fulfill our mission,

even in moments of adversity,” he said.

Suspicious about Father Ratigan first arose in mid-December 2010, when a laptop belonging to the priest, then pastor of St. Patrick Parish in Kansas City, was turned in to diocesan officials; a computer technician found disturbing photos on the hard drive. The photos included pictures of female children at parish events, including one of a naked female child who was not identifiable.

In May, a search of his family’s home turned up a disk and hard drive with 18 different images of child pornography, Father Ratigan was charged with three counts of possession of child pornography in Clay County, followed later by the federal charges.

In a message read in parishes at Masses in early June, Bishop Finn expressed regret for the way the diocese handled information it received about Father Ratigan’s activities.

“As bishop, I take full responsibility for these failures and sincerely apologize to you for them. Clearly, we have to do more. Please know that we have – and will continue to cooperate with all local authorities regarding these matters,” he said.

Contributing to this report was John Thavis in Rome. The full statement from the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph is available at www.diocese-kcsj.org/news/viewNews.php?nid=168.