

Cardinal DiNardo announces plan to address ‘moral catastrophe’ of abuse

WASHINGTON — The president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Aug. 16 announced three key goals and a comprehensive plan to address the “moral catastrophe” of the new abuse scandal hitting the U.S. church.

The plan “will involve the laity, lay experts, the clergy and the Vatican,” Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo of Galveston-Houston said. This plan will be presented to the full body of bishops at their general assembly meeting in Baltimore in November.

Cardinal DiNardo laid out three goals just established by the bishops’ Executive Committee in a series of meetings held early the week of Aug. 13. They are:

— An investigation into the questions surrounding Archbishop Theodore E. McCarrick, a former cardinal and retired archbishop of Washington. With a credible allegation against him that he abused a minor nearly 47 years ago and accusations of sexual misconduct with seminarians, many are asking how he could have risen up the ranks of the church, as an auxiliary bishop, bishop, archbishop and finally cardinal.

— An opening of new and confidential channels for reporting complaints against bishops.

— Advocacy for more effective resolution of future complaints.

“These goals will be pursued according to three criteria: proper independence, sufficient authority and substantial leadership by laity,” Cardinal DiNardo said.

“Two weeks ago, I shared with you my sadness, anger, and shame over the recent revelations concerning Archbishop Theodore McCarrick,” the cardinal said. “Those sentiments continue and are deepened in view of the Pennsylvania grand jury report.

“We are faced with a spiritual crisis that requires not only spiritual conversion, but practical changes to avoid repeating the sins and failures of the past that are so evident in the recent report,” he added.

What follows are excerpts from the cardinal’s statement:

*The first goal is a full **investigation** of questions surrounding Archbishop McCarrick. These answers are necessary to prevent a recurrence, and so help to protect minors, seminarians, and others who are vulnerable in the future. We will therefore invite the Vatican to conduct an Apostolic Visitation to address these questions, in concert with a group of predominantly lay people identified for their expertise by members of the National Review Board and empowered to act.*

*The second goal is to make **reporting** of abuse and misconduct by bishops easier. Our 2002 “Statement of Episcopal Commitment” does not make clear what avenue victims themselves should follow in reporting abuse or other sexual misconduct by bishops. We need to update this document. We also need to develop and widely promote reliable third-party reporting mechanisms. Such tools already exist in many dioceses and in the public sector and we are already examining specific options.*

*The third goal is to advocate for better procedures to **resolve** complaints against bishops. For example, the canonical procedures that follow a complaint will be studied with an eye toward concrete proposals to make them more prompt, fair, and transparent and to specify what constraints may be imposed on bishops at each stage of that process.*

We will pursue these goals according to three criteria.

*The first criterion is genuine **independence**. Any mechanism for addressing any complaint against a bishop must be free from bias or undue influence by a bishop. Our structures must preclude bishops from deterring complaints against them, from hampering their investigation, or from skewing their resolution.*

*The second criterion relates to **authority** in the Church. Because only the Pope has authority to discipline or remove bishops, we will assure that our measures will both respect that authority and protect the vulnerable from the abuse of ecclesial power.*

*Our third criterion is substantial involvement of the **laity**. Lay people bring expertise in areas of investigation, law enforcement, psychology, and other relevant disciplines, and their presence reinforces our commitment to the first criterion of independence.*

Finally, I apologize and humbly ask your forgiveness for what my brother bishops and I have done and failed to do. Whatever the details may turn out to be regarding Archbishop McCarrick or the many abuses in Pennsylvania (or anywhere else), we already know that one root cause is the failure of episcopal leadership. The result was that scores of beloved children of God were abandoned to face an abuse of power alone. This is a moral catastrophe. It is also part of this catastrophe that so many faithful priests who are pursuing holiness and serving with integrity are tainted by this failure.

We firmly resolve, with the help of God's grace, never to repeat it. I have no illusions about the degree to which trust in the bishops has been damaged by these past sins and failures. It will take work to rebuild that trust. What I have outlined here is only the beginning; other steps will follow. I will keep you informed of our progress toward these goals.

Let me ask you to hold us to all of these resolutions. Let me also ask you to pray for us, that we will take this time to reflect, repent, and recommit ourselves to holiness of life and to conform our lives even more to Christ, the Good Shepherd.

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