

Cardinal places 21 Philadelphia priests on leave as inquiry continues

PHILADELPHIA - Continuing his response to the clergy sexual abuse scandal in the Philadelphia Archdiocese, Cardinal Justin Rigali placed 21 priests on administrative leave from their clerical assignments March 7.

Parishes where the priests had been assigned were to be informed of the action at Masses on Ash Wednesday, and again at Masses the following weekend.

The priests' placement on leave is not a final determination, according to a press release issued by the archdiocesan communications office. The action follows "an initial examination of files looking at both the substance of allegations and the process by which those allegations were reviewed," the statement said.

Each case will be subject to a further review in a "thorough, independent investigation."

Cardinal Rigali emphasized the nature of his action March 8.

"I want to be clear," he said in a statement. "These administrative leaves are interim measures. They are not in any way final determinations or judgments."

The unprecedented step to remove such a large group of priests responds to the Philadelphia grand jury's Feb. 10 report that called for the archdiocese to "review all of the old allegations against currently active priests and to remove from ministry all of the priests with credible allegations against them."

Cardinal Rigali described the turmoil existing among Catholics in the archdiocese since the grand jury's report. He said the weeks since have been "difficult most of all for victims of sexual abuse, but also for all Catholics and for everyone in the community."

Philadelphia District Attorney Seth Williams called the action “commendable,” saying it reflects Cardinal Rigali’s “concern for the physical and spiritual well-being of those in his care.”

Williams said his office appreciates that “the archdiocese has acknowledged the value of the report, and seen fit to take some of the steps called for by the grand jury.” He called on the archdiocese to “take the necessary and proper steps to protect children for whom they are responsible, as they have done here.”

The grand jury report had cited 37 priests as continuing in ministry in the Philadelphia Archdiocese despite credible allegations of sex abuse against them.

In addition to the 21, the archdiocese’s statement noted, three priests were placed on administrative leave after the Feb. 10 release of the report. Of five other cases that would have been subject to the same action, one priest was already on leave, two were “incapacitated” and not in ministry, and two others no longer serve in the archdiocese.

Both of the latter two cases concern religious order priests, and their religious superiors plus the bishops of the dioceses in which they reside have been notified, the statement said.

Another eight priests will not be placed on leave, the statement said. “The initial independent examination of these cases,” it said, “found no further investigation is warranted.”

Gina Maisto Smith, the veteran child abuse prosecutor hired by the archdiocese Feb. 16 to lead the intensive re-examination of all the cases cited by the grand jury, recommended the actions to Cardinal Rigali after completing her initial review.

To re-examine the cases, Smith referred to Pennsylvania child protection law, guidelines from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ “Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People” and the archdiocese’s “Standards for Ministerial Behavior and Boundaries.”

The cases concerned allegations ranging from child sexual abuse to other incidents of what the archdiocese terms “boundary issues” – discussions or behavior by a

clergyman that might indicate a pattern leading to later abuse.

Cardinal Rigali's statement acknowledged his "responsibility to respond to this report transparently," and pledged continued cooperation with the district attorney's office. He said he shared with the office and the grand jury "the desire to deal definitively with the concerns noted in the report."

The cardinal also addressed the morale of Catholics in the Philadelphia Archdiocese as a result of the scandal. He said for many people, "their trust in the church has been shaken."

"I pray that the efforts of the archdiocese to address these cases of concern and to re-evaluate our way of handling allegations will help build that trust in truth and justice," he said.

Cardinal Rigali reiterated his "sorrow for the sexual abuse of minors committed by any member of the church, especially clergy," he said. "I am truly sorry for the harm done to the victims of sexual abuse, as well as to the members of our community who suffer as a result of this great evil and crime."