

Dolan: Bishops' commitment to address clergy sex abuse remains firm

WASHINGTON - The U.S. bishops' procedures for addressing child sex abuse remain "strongly in place" and the bishops remain "especially firm" in their commitment "to remove permanently from public ministry any priest who committed such an intolerable offense," said the president of the U.S. bishops' conference.

"This painful issue continues to receive our careful attention," said Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan of New York.

"The protection of our children and young people is of highest priority," the archbishop said in a statement released March 24. He added that the "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People" approved by the bishops in 2002 "remains strongly in place."

He said the bishops who met in Washington for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Administrative Committee meeting March 22-23 asked him to offer reassurances about the church's resolve to address sexual abuse and deal firmly with clergy who abuse children.

The Administrative Committee - composed of the executive officers, committee chairmen and regional representatives of the USCCB - is the highest decision-making body of the bishops apart from the entire body when it meets twice a year in general assembly.

"We bishops recommit ourselves to the rigorous mandates of the charter, and renew our confidence in its effectiveness," Archbishop Dolan said in his statement. "We repeat what we have said in the charter: 'We make our own the words of His Holiness, Pope John Paul II: that the sexual abuse of young people is by every standard wrong and rightly considered a crime by society; it is also an appalling sin in the eyes of God.'"

Both the “Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People” and norms the U.S. bishops approved for dioceses to adhere to the charter’s mandates have Vatican approval. The charter, which also established the bishops’ Office for Child and Youth Protection, was updated in 2005, the norms in 2006.

The charter mandates that safe environment programs be set up in dioceses and parishes. It also requires an annual audit on how dioceses and religious orders are complying with provisions in the charter.

In the nine years since the charter was first approved, “we have constantly reviewed the high promises and rigorous mandates of the charter, as we continually try to make it even more effective,” Archbishop Dolan said.

He said the bishops “keep refining” it based on input from the lay-led National Review Board and from Catholic parents, professionals, the victim-survivor community, law enforcement officials and diocesan victim-assistance coordinators.

“We want to learn from our mistakes and we welcome constructive criticism,” the archbishop added.

He said the bishops are to take up a “long-planned review” of the charter during their June meeting.

Archbishop Dolan said the audits will continue in order to check on how well the church is able “to protect our young people, promote healing of victims/survivors and restore trust.”

His statement referred to “recent disclosures about the church’s response to the sexual abuse of minors by priests” but did not mention the recent clergy sex abuse crisis in the Philadelphia Archdiocese.

A Philadelphia grand jury released a report Feb. 10 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.”

In response, the archdiocese among other things has hired a former sex crimes prosecutor to review personnel files of the 37 priests named in the grand jury’s

report. Cardinal Justin Rigali has placed 21 priests on administrative leave while any allegations made against them are reviewed.

In his statement, Archbishop Dolan said the progress the church has made in addressing abuse “must continue and cannot be derailed; we want to strengthen it even more; we can never stop working at it, because each child and young person must always be safe, loved and cherished in the church.”

He said the designation of April as National Child Abuse Prevention Month provides the bishops with “the providential opportunity to unite with all Americans in a renewed resolve to halt the scourge of sexual abuse of youth in our society.”