

Former prosecutor to re-examine sex abuse claims against 37 priests

PHILADELPHIA - The Catholic Church in Philadelphia has pledged a re-examination of the cases of 37 priests who a grand jury report says remain in active ministry despite credible allegations of sexual abuse of minors.

Three priests named in the report were immediately prohibited from publicly exercising their priestly ministry until the latest review is complete.

“Change begins with action,” the Philadelphia Archdiocese said in a Feb. 16 statement. “The grand jury report makes it clear that for as much as the archdiocese has done to address child sexual abuse, there is still much to do.”

The archdiocese also placed Monsignor William J. Lynn on administrative leave from his assignment as pastor of St. Joseph Parish in Downingtown, Pa. He was arrested on two charges of endangering the welfare of a child in connection with his role as the former archdiocesan secretary for clergy. He remains free on bail until his trial date, which has not been set.

Monsignor Lynn remains pastor of the parish but Monsignor Joseph C. McLoone, pastor of St. Katharine Drexel Parish in Chester, assumes the duties of parochial administrator.

The re-examination of the 37 cases will be led for the archdiocese by Gina Maisto Smith, a former city assistant district attorney with long experience prosecuting child sexual assault cases who now practices law privately.

As she reviews the 37 cases mentioned in the grand jury report, she “will also re-examine the procedures that were used in those cases,” she said during an interview Feb. 17.

“I will then make recommendations from that examination and other evidence that emerges in that process,” she said. “There may be things that I don’t know now that haven’t yet emerged.”

Smith is a civil lawyer. But because priests and church policy are involved, canon or church law is certain to become a consideration in the cases she reviews.

She said she foresees the possibility of “a moment in time when those things are at odds,” adding she would work closely on such issues with Philadelphia Auxiliary Bishop Michael J. Fitzgerald, a canon law expert and a civil lawyer.

Smith said if a conflict between her recommendation and one based on canon law arose, she would not recommend a course favoring canon law “because that fits into the ‘using something else’ to cover up” possible indications of sexual abuse or misconduct.

“So to the extent we could have some way to see through that conflict, we’ll do our best to reconcile our efforts with canon law to ensure the protection of children,” Smith said.

Philadelphia Auxiliary Bishop Daniel E. Thomas also discussed the fallout of the grand jury report Feb. 17.

“The first reality is, victims are suffering,” he said. “As a result of that (Cardinal Justin Rigali) made mention in his letter (to all parishioners on Feb. 12) from St. Paul, ‘when one member of the body suffers, all suffer.’”

He suggested not only victims of sexual abuse are suffering at this time, but so too are the “faithful majority” of priests, who serve parishioners “with dedication, fidelity and with great sincerity.” For these priests, he added, “the suffering is that victims could be harmed and that a brother priest could be involved.”

Another cause of anguish among priests, the bishop said, “is because priests are called to represent the person of Jesus Christ. They are called to that higher moral standard. It’s not that they are placed on a pedestal but because that is what is required of them by their office in the church.”

Bishop Thomas said he has heard that a number of archdiocesan priests are struggling to cope at this time, but he also has heard encouraging reports.

At one parish last Sunday, he said, the pastor confronted the issue in his homily with

sensitivity and sincerity, then led the entire congregation in silent prayer before the Blessed Sacrament before continuing Mass.

Bishop Thomas has heard from “priests who have been supported by their faithful, who are saying we stand by you, we love and together we will get through this difficulty,” he said.

He acknowledged many Catholics might be experiencing a crisis of confidence in the church’s initiatives.

“It’s incumbent (on the church) to get to the root of the issue,” he said, “and to put in place those actions that are going to address any of the behaviors which are both sinful and criminal.”