

# Poll finds many Catholics unaware of abuse prevention

WASHINGTON - Only one-third of Catholics in a national survey said they had heard of the U.S. bishops' policies to prevent child sex abuse and respond to abuse allegations, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate said May 16.

Only one-sixth said they have heard of the abuse prevention programs in their own diocese, it added.

CARA, an independent church research agency at Georgetown University in Washington, surveyed 1,048 self-identified Catholics through Knowledge Networks, which has a panel made up of a large random sample of U.S. residents who agree to participate in a variety of online polls in return for free Internet access.

Those without home computers are given equipment to access the Web through their television. With more than 1,000 respondents, CARA said the margin of sampling error was plus or minus 3 percent.

It said that those surveyed were presented with 13 specific policies and procedures implemented by the bishops to prevent abuse, deal with allegations and reach out to victims. The bishops have committed themselves to those policies and procedures since June 2002, when they adopted their "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People."

On each of the policies and procedures the majority of respondents were unaware that it existed.

Forty-five percent knew the church has a policy to report any allegation of abuse of a minor to authorities and cooperate with investigations. Nearly as many, 43 percent, knew there is a zero-tolerance policy whereby anyone credibly accused of abusing a minor is removed from ministry.

At the bottom of the awareness scale, only 14 percent knew the charter requires dioceses to undergo annual independent audits to determine whether they are enforcing their policies and only 15 percent knew dioceses have to submit annual

reports on their adherence to the charter.

Just under one-third knew dioceses are required to reach out to victims and their families and provide help such as counseling, spiritual assistance, support groups and social services.

Most respondents were unaware that, of the known incidents of sexual abuse of minors by priests since 1950, the vast majority – about three-fourths – occurred between 1960 and 1984, with a significant drop in the numbers since then.

Forty-four percent said they thought instances of such abuse were about as common before and after 1985, and 26 percent thought such abuse had become more common since 1985. Only 30 percent answered correctly that such abuse was more common before 1985 than it has been since then.

Despite the widespread ignorance about the church's policies and programs, CARA found respondents supportive of them.

“Although few Catholics are aware of the steps the church has taken, when informed about them, large majorities approve these actions,” CARA said. It said when respondents were informed of a series of specific policies and procedures implemented by the bishops and asked to express approval or disapproval, “between 76 and 89 percent of all respondents say they either ‘somewhat’ or ‘strongly’ approve.”

On several key items most of those who expressed approval felt strongly about it. On reporting an allegation of sex abuse to public authorities, 78 percent said they approved strongly and 11 percent somewhat. On the policy of zero tolerance, that is, not allowing anyone to stay in ministry if credibly accused of abuse, 76 percent approved strongly and 12 percent somewhat. On each of those issues most of the remainder had no opinion.

CARA found that a majority of respondents said knowing about the church's sex abuse procedures and policies is most likely to increase their confidence in the bishops.

It said at least 71 percent gave at least a “fair” rating to the way the country's

bishops as a whole have handled the issue, including 23 percent who rated it “good” and 6 percent who rated it “excellent.” When respondents were asked about how well their own bishop was doing, the ratings were higher.

One-third of respondents said the charter’s policies “do enough” to protect minors from sexual abuse and two-thirds said the policies “should go further.”

To those who said the church should go further, an open-ended question was posed asking for suggestions. Many answers focused on more openness and communication by church officials, closer cooperation with public authorities and additional measures to prevent future abuse including more education and better screening of those who work with children. Some urged more severe punishment for abusers and – to a lesser extent, CARA said – for those in leadership who were aware of the abuse.