

Staying the Just Course

The Catholic Review

The unfortunate story in this week's Catholic Review about Our Lady of the Fields Church in Millersville underscores the Church's critical responsibilities in the areas of child protection, human resources and finances. It also highlights the various systems that are in place to ensure compliance with the policies that govern how we provide safe environments for children and young people, and how we appropriately manage the financial resources entrusted to us.

A recent audit conducted at Our Lady of the Fields indicated a lack of appropriate controls in the following areas:

- Oversight and management of offertory funds;
- Payments to vendors and employees; and
- Compliance with human resources and child protection policies pertaining to safe environment training and the maintenance of required documentation for all employees and volunteers.

As a result of the audit's findings, Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski, whose vicariate includes the parishes of Anne Arundel County, met with the parish's pastor, Father Eugene Nickol. Bishop Rozanski expressed to Father Nickol the gravity of the audit findings, the potential harm that existed, and the Archdiocese's responsibility to appropriately respond. At the conclusion of the meeting and upon learning of the extent of the stewardship and child protection lapses that were his responsibility to protect against, Father Nickol offered his resignation, which was accepted.

Though the parish had been scheduled for a routine audit, it was an anonymous tip that led to this more comprehensive review. While the Archdiocese conducts audits and relies on each parish's lay leadership team (two corporators and its finance committee and pastoral council members) the Church also provides an outlet to others to share information about possible abuse, human resources and financial improprieties.

My predecessor, Cardinal William Keeler, wisely instituted a vehicle for the confidential reporting of such issues. Through an independent third party, Ethicspoint, people wishing to report suspected violations of Archdiocesan policies can do so by filing confidential reports online or via a hotline, both of which are managed by Ethicspoint.

Complaints related to financial misconduct can include:

- Accounting and auditing matters;
- Disclosures of confidential information;
- Conflicts of interest;
- Donor stewardship issues;
- Embezzlement or theft;
- Falsification of contracts, records or reports.

Complaints related to human resources issues can include:

- Discrimination;
- Sexual harassment;
- Employee relations;
- Workplace violence/threats;
- Substance abuse.

A similar hotline for the reporting of suspected cases of child abuse is managed by our Office of Child and Youth Protection.

Each report is confidential and the information provided to us is valued because it helps us in our efforts to promote transparency and accountability and to ensure healthy and safe environments in our parishes, schools and other Catholic institutions.

One of the painful lessons of the sexual abuse crisis is the need for transparent communications, responsibly acting on information that is shared, no matter how painful it may be, and holding responsible individuals accountable. Our Church can never return to the days when these practices were not a priority. If we are to earn and maintain the trust of our people, we owe it to them to continue to stay this difficult but just course.

Please join me in praying for the people of Our Lady of the Fields, who are suffering from the unexpected loss of their beloved pastor of eight years; for Father Nickol, who by all accounts was a loving and caring pastor; and for all who work to advance the holy mission of our Church.

To report concerns related to human resources issues or financial misconduct, visit ethicspoint.com or call 888-572-8026. The Child and Youth Protection Hotline is 866-417-7469.