

‘We dare not become complacent’ on abuse, says South Dakota bishop

WASHINGTON - Despite the small number of credible cases of clergy sexual abuse reported in 2007, “we dare not become complacent” on the issue, said Bishop Blase J. Cupich of Rapid City, S.D., the new chairman of the U.S. bishops’ Committee on the Protection of Children and Young People.

“In 2007, there were 12 credible instances of minors being abused. That’s 12 instances too many,” Bishop Cupich said in a Dec. 8 letter to his fellow bishops.

“However, even with the small number in a church of 67 million people, we dare not become complacent. The effects of the sin and crime of sexual abuse by a cleric are so horrific that we need to make sure that efforts to protect young people continue,” he said.

In his letter, he outlined steps the church had taken to prevent abuse from 2003 through 2007, when the last audits of U.S. dioceses’ safe environment programs were completed.

Audits of how each U.S. diocese and eparchy has dealt with clergy sexual abuse have been conducted since 2003. Bishop Cupich said the 2008 audits were close to completion.

In that five-year period, he said the church had trained more than 1.8 million clergy, employees and volunteers in parishes in how to create safe environments and prevent child sexual abuse.

Bishop Cupich added that the church also had prepared more than 5.8 million children to recognize abuse and protect themselves, and had run criminal record checks on more than 1.53 million volunteers and employees, 162,700 educators, 51,000 clerics and 4,955 candidates for ordination.

“This is a record of accomplishment that deserves to be widely known and expanded by our ongoing commitment,” said Bishop Cupich, who took over as chairman of the

committee this November at the end of the bishops' fall general meeting. He was voted in as chairman-elect of the committee in November 2007.

He said outreach to victims of clergy sex abuse must continue to be a priority.

"We need to expand our efforts to make sure that everyone knows how to report instances of sexual abuse by a cleric or other church employee to both civil and church authorities," Bishop Cupich said.

"Enabling people to make a report has been a goal from the start. Placement of notices in church facilities, on diocesan Web sites in prominent locations and in the media has been one step to encouraging such a response, which can otherwise be daunting," he said.

"Equally important, if not more so, is guaranteeing that those who contact the church with a complaint are treated compassionately and with respect. This is paramount," he said.

Another priority, according to Bishop Cupich, is prevention of abuse through the safe environment programs set up in dioceses and parishes as mandated by the "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People," which was approved by the bishops in 2002.

"These child protection efforts outline specific steps to be followed so that decisions on what constitutes appropriate behavior between an adult and child are not based on biases or personal interpretations," he said.

"These efforts also emphasize respect for boundaries between persons and empowerment of young people to resist what makes them uncomfortable," he said. "If we are to err in establishing and enforcing policies, it must be on the side of caution."

These programs, Bishop Cupich added, are "the envy of all other organizations that work with children."

"At the start of 2009, I urge dioceses and parishes to make sure their safe environment programs are of the highest standards," he said.

“I ask bishops and pastors to make sure that safe environment programs are in place in all church entities,” he continued. “I encourage parents to cooperate and support these efforts and to make known to church leaders their concerns and suggestions for improving and fully observing our safe environment protocols.”