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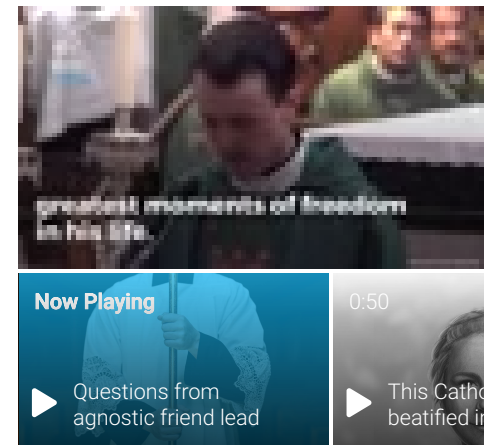
From left to right: Bishop Christopher Coyne, Cardinal Daniel DiNardo and Bishop Timothy Doherty at the USCCB news conference in Baltimore Nov. 12. (Christine Rousselle/CNA)

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What Will the US Bishops and the Pope Do Next to Combat Abuse Crisis?

ANALYSIS

JD Flynn/CNA



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Trending

1. Saginaw Priest Removed From Parish

WASHINGTON — Bishop Frank Rodimer and Father Peter Osinski were friends.

Father Osinski was a priest in the Diocese of Camden, New Jersey. Bishop Rodimer was bishop of Paterson, a nearby diocese, from 1978 until 2004.

For years the men rented a beach house together each summer on New Jersey's Long Beach Island, south of Seaside and north of Atlantic City. There, for seven years in the 1980s, Father Osinski molested a young boy. The first year it happened, the boy was 7.

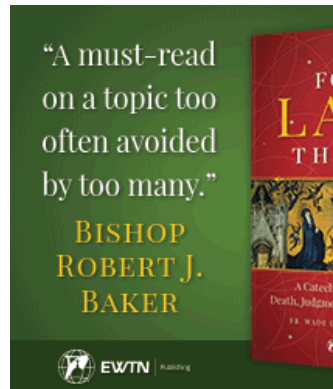
The priest was arrested in 1997. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison.

In 1999, the victim settled a lawsuit against the bishop, the priest and the priest's diocese. Bishop Rodimer was not alleged to have committed sexual abuse, but the suit charged that the bishop had been negligent in failing to recognize what was going on.

In 2002 Bishop Rodimer apologized for failing to prevent the abuse at the beach house. He also acknowledged that he had mishandled other cases of sexual abuse involving priests of his diocese.

At the same time, he defended his decision to allow an admitted child abuser, Father William Cramer, to serve as a hospital chaplain from 1991 to 2002.

For much of his tenure in Paterson, Bishop Rodimer was the senior suffragan bishop of the ecclesiastical province of Newark.



At the U.S. bishops' conference meeting in Baltimore this month, Cardinal Blase Cupich proposed that metropolitans — archbishops — should be responsible for investigating claims of misconduct or negligence against their suffragan bishops. If metropolitans are accused, the plan says, the senior suffragan bishop should investigate.

for Traditional 'Style of Worship'



2. Dear Parents, Be Patient on Your Long Walk Home to Heaven



3. Bishop Daly: No Holy Communion for Catholic Politicians Who Support Abortion



4. Get Out Now: Why You Should Pull Your Child from Public School



5. Los Angeles Rams' Kicker on the Sole Goal of a Christian



6. Did Fulton Sheen Prophecy About These Times?



If that plan had been in place during Archbishop Theodore McCarrick's last years in Newark, Bishop Rodimer would have been the one charged with looking into allegations against McCarrick.

Of course, Bishop Rodimer retired 14 years ago. And the fact that he was McCarrick's senior suffragan bishop does not suggest that metropolitan and suffragan bishops are universally unqualified to address charges of sexual misconduct or administrative negligence in the life of the Church.

But Bishop Rodimer's position as McCarrick's one-time senior suffragan is a reminder that addressing the problems of sexual abuse, misconduct and administrative negligence is not as simple a proposition as many Catholics, and bishops, would like it to be.

U.S. bishops have learned that lesson in recent weeks, even as responsibility for solving the problem has shifted, apparently by the Pope's design, to Rome.

After several confusing and turbulent weeks in the Church, it is worth asking where reform efforts stand and where they will be going.

Baltimore, Thwarted Plans and the 'Metropolitan Model'

It is now well-known that this month's meeting of the U.S. bishops' conference was unlike any USCCB meeting that had come before it. The bishops arrived in Baltimore Nov. 12 prepared to pray together and then to vote on facets of a plan they believed would address the allegations of episcopal sexual misconduct and administrative malfeasance that have plagued the Church in recent months.

They planned to pass a "Code of Conduct" for bishops, create a whistleblower hotline and establish an independent lay-led team of experts charged with investigating allegations made against bishops.

On Monday morning, as the meeting opened, Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, the conference president, [announced that their plans had been iced](#): The Vatican had determined they should wait to vote until after a January retreat for U.S. bishops and a February meeting involving the heads of bishops' conferences from around the world.

Cardinal DiNardo himself seemed stunned. Bishops and observers were confused. Many bishops felt they had to return to their dioceses with evidence that some action had been taken to address diminishing lay confidence in their ability to address the ongoing crisis.

Nevertheless, the meeting continued. By the end, at least one official action had been taken: Cardinal DiNardo announced the formation of a task force, consisting of several former USCCB presidents, to assist him in assessing open questions and possible plans that arose from the meeting, in preparation for the February gathering at the Vatican.

7. Saving Andrew Cuomo's Soul



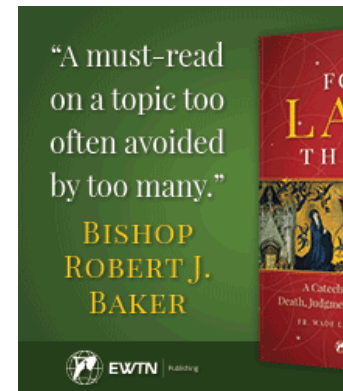
8. Teen Experiences Sudden Healing at the March for Life



9. Cardinal Müller Issues 'Manifesto of Faith'



10. Stand, Sit, Kneel, Repeat: Why Catholics Do the Things We Do



While several open questions are part of its mandate, the main job of the task force seems to be developing two competing proposals for the investigation of bishops.

The initial plan for investigating bishops, introduced by conference leadership before the November meeting, called for a lay-led commission that could investigate allegations made against bishops who support the funding of the commission and choose to allow themselves to be investigated.

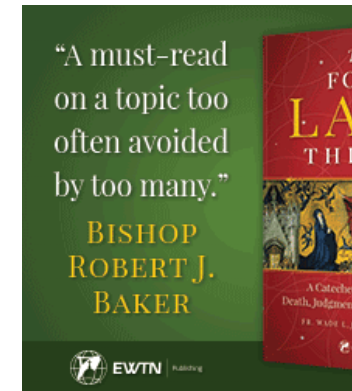
Proponents of this plan say it has the benefit of inscrutability; that leadership by independent lay experts will ensure fair and thorough evaluations of complaints and assist the Holy See by providing accurate and impartial information. Opponents at the Baltimore meeting raised a variety of objections: that funding the commission will be expensive, that the commission might not have a sufficient number of allegations to justify staffing it, that the plan puts laity into a position of “authority” over bishops, or, conversely, that the plan does not give sufficient authority to investigators because participation is not compulsory.

After voting on that proposal was suspended, a new plan surfaced during the bishops’ meeting, introduced by Cardinal Cupich. That plan would have metropolitans, or archbishops, along with their archdiocesan review boards, investigate allegations against bishops. If archbishops were accused, the senior diocesan bishop in the ecclesiastical province would investigate the plan, with assistance from his review board.

The proponents of the “metropolitan model” plan say that it appropriately involves laity, is more consistent with Catholic ecclesiology, and is notably less expensive than the alternative proposal. At least one bishop at the recent meeting said it seems more fitting for bishops to be judged by bishops. Critics of the approach say that while the plan might work in theory, it is too late for the Church to impose a policy in which bishops are responsible for overseeing investigations into other bishops; that trust has eroded in the institution and is more likely to be restored by outside, independent lay involvement. Other critics say that the plan imposes responsibility on the metropolitan he may not be prepared to fulfill, and that could lead, potentially, to legal liabilities.

Disagreement among the bishops over these proposals is not ideological. Both Cardinal Cupich and Archbishop Charles Chaput support the metropolitan model, though they often have markedly divergent theological viewpoints. Most observers say that both plans have strengths and weaknesses that should be explored before any plan is recommended or implemented. The task force will take up that exploration. Its conclusions will be submitted to Cardinal DiNardo before the February meeting.

The task force’s work could prove to be for naught if the Pope, Vatican officials or the meeting’s planning committee already know what they hope to see come from the meeting. Cardinal Cupich, who was appointed by Pope Francis, said recently that the meeting will work to accomplish some “specific outcomes that reflect the mind of Pope Francis.”



It is not certain that the Pope supports the metropolitan plan proposed by Cardinal Cupich and publicly floated in August by Cardinal Donald Wuerl, but the appointment of Cardinal Cupich to the [meeting's planning committee](#) seems to suggest that the Pope supports at least the cardinal's basic approach.

Still, of concern to many American Catholics at this point are not the specifics of any initiative undertaken, but, rather, that the Vatican does something concrete and direct, and soon, to demonstrate that sexual coercion and abuse are intolerable, as is episcopal administrative negligence.

At the same time, some bishops have said that while the Pope's apparent reticence to commit to a particular plan is concerning, it is also important that such a serious matter be addressed wisely and prudently so that policies implemented hastily are not subsequently revoked.

For many American Catholics, however, the Vatican's reticence to allow action seems to reflect a so-called paralysis of analysis. Some worry that episcopal malfeasance will go on unaddressed long after the February meeting — that while the Pope seeks global consensus, reform in the U.S. will remain at a standstill. Some note that while talks are on hiatus, bishops accused of negligence or misconduct, among them Bishop Richard Malone of Buffalo, New York, and Bishop Michael Hoeppner of Crookston, Minnesota, do not seem to be the subjects of ecclesiastical inquiries into their status.

This situation, they say, will lead to increasingly diminished confidence in the Church's capacity to reform itself and increasingly stronger support for the intervention of civil authorities.

These critics note especially that there has yet been little evidence of a canonical process for McCarrick, a situation to which global media outlets have remained attentive.

McCarrick Vote

It is frustration about McCarrick that seems to have fueled much of the criticism from lay Catholics of the U.S. bishops. While the stalled policy reform can be attributed to the Vatican, many Catholics have expressed discouragement at a perceived lack of commitment from bishops to press for answers on McCarrick.

Commentators and some bishops seemed especially frustrated that the USCCB failed to pass a resolution encouraging the Vatican to release all legally permissible documents related to McCarrick's alleged misconduct.

During debate at the USCCB meeting this month, some bishops said the resolution was unnecessary because the Vatican had already pledged to release a summary report of its own internal investigation of documents related to McCarrick. One bishop said the resolution

could be interpreted as an expression of distrust in the Vatican. Some bishops seemed uneasy about seeming to publicly pressure the Vatican, especially since previous efforts to that effect by conference leadership had been rebuffed.

But one bishop told CNA that debate over the resolution got “lost in the weeds” and lost sight of the symbolic importance of the resolution to Catholics hoping to see an act of solidarity and leadership from their bishops, a collective affirmation of the importance of the McCarrick investigation. After the Vatican’s suspension of policy votes, the bishop said, Catholics wanted to feel that their bishops continue to press for answers, that they are not afraid of what might be discovered.

The resolution, however, failed by a wide margin.

What’s Coming

These are unpredictable times in the life of the Church, shaped by events with little precedent. But four points seem clear about the months to come.

The first is that the February meeting is unlikely to conclude with the adoption of reform policies. Cardinal Cupich has said the meeting will be the start of a process: Given that the meeting is scheduled to last for only three days, it seems impossible to expect any policies to be adopted or promulgated. This will probably enflame a new round of frustration among U.S. Catholics, and many U.S. bishops, who perceive an urgent need to debate and decide on reform policy.

While a slower process might indeed lead to better, more well-constructed policies, there will be a price to pay for the pace, and it will be measured in the costs of civil investigations, lawsuits and possible indictments, and in the number of disaffected Catholics who lose faith in the Church while they wait.

The second is that the episcopal conference now seems unlikely to remain the principal method of communication between the Vatican and the U.S. bishops. The Pope has rebuffed several public requests from conference leadership for an apostolic visitation into McCarrick and publicly rebuffed, at the very last minute, their plan to vote on reform policies. And it is telling that Francis appointed Cardinal Cupich, who is not a part of the conference’s elected leadership, to help plan a meeting for the elected leaders of conferences around the world and to represent the U.S. in the planning group.

The Pope has previously appointed Cardinal Cupich to accompany elected U.S. representatives to Vatican meetings, including the 2015 synod on the family and the 2018 synod on the youth. The Pope has again affirmed his trust in Chicago’s archbishop, who, in light of that trust and his appointment to February planning committee, will be more

frequently seen as an unofficial but important bridge, and interpreter, between Rome and the U.S.

Next, it seems obvious that Catholics will continue to call for action from the U.S. Church's leadership, as will civil authorities. Their call is likely to grow more impatient. Calls to withhold financial support from diocesan apostolates are likely to continue, although few observers expect such calls to have a serious impact on the bottom line for most dioceses. Far more likely to have serious financial and operational impact on the Church will be the decisions of the U.S. attorney and state attorneys general — indictments or litigation could have both domestic and Vatican consequences.

Finally, there is one positive development worth noting: During the recent bishops' meeting, Cardinal DiNardo offered several opportunities for bishops to speak candidly about the sex-abuse crisis and their experiences. Some bishops spoke very personally about their own needs, their concerns, their shortcomings and their hopes. Cardinal Joseph Tobin spoke earnestly, as did Archbishop George Lucas, Bishop Andrew Cozzens and several others. Some bishops told CNA they sensed the Holy Spirit prompting a more fraternal exchange, a new openness to more human engagement, and even disagreement, on the floor of the meeting.

It would be a strange development if the sex-abuse crisis ushered in a new era of episcopal candor and a more discerning mode of operation for the bishops' conference. But as the past few weeks have demonstrated, "strange developments" are the ordinary course of affairs for the Church. What will come next remains to be seen.

JD Flynn is editor in chief of Catholic News Agency.

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