

PROTECTING GOD'S CHILDREN

Bishop Jugis addresses sexual abuse issues

Local, national abuse statistics released

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editor

CHARLOTTE -- As part of its ongoing commitment to effectively deal with the sin of sexual abuse of minors by some clergy, the Diocese of Charlotte released information included in the national John Jay study Feb. 27.

The study, conducted by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York, was commissioned by the all-lay National Review Board under the mandate of the U.S. bishops' "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People." The report, compiled by figures submitted by almost all of the 195 U.S. dioceses, presented data on the nature and scope of the sexual abuse of minors by some priests from 1950 through 2002.

Also on Feb. 27, the National Review Board released a companion study on the causes and context behind clerical abuse of minors, based on a series of interviews with scores of church leaders and specialists. When the bishops formed the board in 2002, part of its mandate was to develop those studies.

The 46-county Diocese of Charlotte reported 12 priests had allegations of sexual misconduct made against them since the establishment of the diocese in 1972. Upon investigation, two priests were exonerated. The percentage of priests with allegations against them is 1.8 percent of the 663 active and retired priests in the diocese between 1972 and 2002.

The clergy alleged to have been involved in these incidents are deceased, retired or no longer in active ministry.

During this same period of 30 years, 19 allegations of sexual misconduct were made against the 12 priests in the Diocese of Charlotte, and the diocese paid \$704,439 for counseling and other services to victims, and for legal fees.

In 2003, an additional amount of \$10,892 was paid for counseling. However, no new allegations regarding sexual abuse of minors by clergy were reported.

Diocesan insurance funds and the diocesan general fund were used for payment. No money from the Diocesan Support Appeal and no parish savings were used.

"The publication of this information affirms the pledge of the Diocese of Charlotte to root out the sinful crime of sex abuse and to do everything humanly possibly to make sure that it will not recur," said Bishop Peter J. Jugis.

The bishop addressed the sexual abuse of minors by some clergy during his homily at St. Patrick Cathedral on Ash Wednesday, Feb. 25. He also called Catholics to prayer during this season of Lent.

"The theme for Lent this year as set forth by Pope John Paul II is, 'Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.' (Mt. 18:15). It is an invitation for all of us, Catholic or not, to reflect upon the condition of children and especially those children who have been profoundly hurt by the violence of adults," said Bishop Jugis.

"We are called to protect children and young people," he said.

National perspective

U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops president Bishop Wilton D. Gregory of Belleville, Ill., noted that "we don't have comparable statistics" from other organizations or professions that could be used to gauge the significance of the John Jay data on clerical abusers and their victims.

"I would like to believe that the Catholic Church is taking a bold step not only because of the seriousness of this issue for us, but the seriousness of this issue for all of society. ... I trust that what we are doing will advance the knowledge of this horrible crime in other venues," he said.

In the Feb. 27 report of national figures covering the period 1950-2002, the total number of priests with allegations of abuse is 4,932. The report said there were 109,694 active priests in this time period, and using this number, 4.0 percent of all priests active between 1950 and 2002 had allegations of abuse.

A total of 10,667 individuals made allegations of child sexual abuse by priests. Of those who alleged abuse, the study contained information that 17.2 percent of them had siblings who were also allegedly abused.

The report said the amount of money already paid as a result of allegations, to victims, for the treatment of priests and for legal expenses was \$507,000,000 (including a highly publicized \$85,000,000 settlement not included in the surveys from dioceses).

Thomas Plante, a psychology professor at Santa Clara University in California who treats clergy sex abusers and their victims, said the 4 percent figure is keeping with previous estimates and may not be far off from the general adult male population.

"There is a lot of male sex abuse of minors. Tragically, it is not an infrequent problem," said Plante.

He said there is child sex abuse in other religions and in professions such as teaching and coaching. Regarding the clergy figures, Plante said the positive side is that more than 95 percent of priests did not abuse.

"The bishops of America undertook this unprecedented study, knowing full well that it would put our church and this sinful crime in the spotlight," said Bishop Jugis.

"The bishops can't change history, but we can make sure that it is not repeated by determining the nature and scope of the problem," he said. "With this information, the bishops can determine whether the steps we have taken are adequate to the problem."

Protecting children

The Diocese of Charlotte was among the nearly 90 percent of U.S. dioceses in compliance with the U.S. bishops' national policy to protect children and respond to clergy sexual abuse of minors, according to the first national audit report released Jan. 6.

The report was based on an independent compliance audit conducted by the Boston-based Gavin Group, headed by William Gavin, a former FBI official, and overseen by Kathleen McChesney, a former top FBI agent and head of the U.S. bishops' Office of Child and Youth Protection.

The Diocese of Charlotte was commended for its early proactive initiatives to ensure the protection of children and youths under its pastoral care. In 1994, the diocese adopted its "Policy of the Diocese of Charlotte Concerning Ministry-Related Sexual Misconduct by Church Personnel," which included the establishment of a review board, a group of volunteers not employed by the diocese, with the exception of one priest.

The group includes a psychological counselor. Their role is to review allegations of abuse and to make recommendations to the bishop.

The diocese was also commended for its comprehensive Safe Environment Program, which includes training programs and background investigations for clergy, volunteers, teachers and contractors who have contact with minors.

Since June 2002, more than 7,000 diocesan employees and volunteers have completed the Protecting God's Children Training Program to help them recognize and prevent the sexual abuse of children.

Auditors also recommended the Diocese of Charlotte's policy for reporting allegations of sexual abuse of a minor by clergy be made more readily available. The diocese complied with the recommendation through regular announcements in church bulletins, The Catholic News & Herald and its Web site, www.charlottediocese.org.

"Here in the Diocese of Charlotte, we have policies, people, programs and, most importantly, prayer to address this problem," said Bishop Jugis. "Prayer is the primary response for the people of God when confronted with something as evil as sex abuse."

"I pray on a daily basis for all victims of this crime, and I ask the 140,000 Catholics in our diocese to do the same," he said.

Catholic News Service contributed to this story.