



An update on the sex abuse scandal

The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People

>> By Douglas Culp

The church in the U.S. is no stranger to the scandal of sexual abuse. Inherently evil, sexual abuse, especially of minors, is an act of violence that betrays the trust of the victim and violates the dignity and respect owed to them as a human being. Sadly, the scandal currently spreading through the universal church expresses the reality that the horror of sexual abuse knows no geographic boundaries. In response, dioceses in the U.S. have made a concerted effort over the last decade to have zero tolerance policies for abusers – removing them from ministry and reporting them to legal authorities. They have put into place programs to prevent sex abuse, provided for victims and submitted to independent audits to ensure ongoing compliance with the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*.

Bishops worldwide are encouraged to meet with victims of clerical sex abuse, just as Pope Benedict XVI has done, said the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

“There is nothing that helps bishops or priests learn about this problem better than meeting with the victims and hearing their stories,” U.S. Cardinal William J. Levada said in a televised interview April 27.

Pope Benedict XVI has met with victims several times, and “that’s an example to bishops,” he said.

... Concerning the recent resignation of bishops over their handling of sex abuse cases, Cardinal Levada said he would not be surprised if there were more resignations to follow. He said the standard by which bishops are expected to address clerical sex abuse is “not new, but it’s

being applied more rigorously than in the past.”

“I will look forward to helping my brother bishops around the world see what can be done if you take good concrete steps, put things out on the table, make sure that you’ve got a program to educate your priests and screen for any problem areas as you are admitting priests and have a good program for (a) safe environment,” he said.

The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People

This document, originally drafted in 2002 and revised in 2005 by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), sought to begin the hard work of reconciliation and restoring trust through a commitment to creating and maintaining a safe environment for children and young people.

The *Charter* addresses each of the following: outreach to victims or survivors of sexual abuse in the hope of facilitating healing and reconcilia-

>> To inform the Diocese of Grand Rapids of the sexual abuse of a minor by a priest, deacon or other church personnel, please contact the victim assistance coordinator at **616.243.0491**. Additional information and resources from the USCCB's Office for Child and Youth Protection may be found by visiting usccb.org/ocyp/index.shtml.

tion; appropriate response to allegations of sexual abuse of minors; accountability to the *Charter's* procedures; and protection of the faithful going forward.

The *Charter* established the Office for Child and Youth Protection, which is charged with providing the “focus for a consistent, ongoing and comprehensive approach to creating a secure environment for young people throughout the church.” This includes reporting on the implementation of the *Charter* based on independent compliance audits.

A National Review Board was created to “assist in the assessment of diocesan compliance with the *Charter* and to commission studies on the sexual abuse of minors.” The Board issued a *Report on the Crisis in the Catholic Church* in the United States and commissioned the *John Jay Report*, which examined the nature and scope of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy between 1950 and 2002.

Essential Norms

In addition to the *Charter*, the USCCB approved as “particular law” the *Essential Norms for Diocesan/Eparchial Policies Dealing with Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests or Deacons* in 2005. These norms provide each diocese/eparchy in the United States with the foundation for putting into place procedures to respond promptly to all allegations of sexual abuse of minors.

The norms require dioceses/eparchies to have the following: a written policy, a designated person to coordinate assistance for the immediate pastoral care of persons claiming to have been sexually abused as minors by priests or deacons; a diocesan review board composed of at least five persons; and a protocol for dealing with the investigation of allegations and handling of the accused priest or deacon.



Safe Environment

As part of the *Charter*, churches, schools and youth organizations must ensure that all children and youth under their care are kept in the “safest and most secure setting possible.” Consequently, safe environment programs have been developed and mandated to assist parents, children and those who work with children to prevent harm to young people.

The USCCB lists several components of any effective safe environment program:

- A code of conduct for clergy and for any other paid personnel and volunteers in positions of trust who have regular contact with children and young people.
- Criminal background checks and training for all adults who work with children, including clergy.
- A training program for children that includes age appropriate materials pertaining to personal safety.

For Parents

The USCCB is clear that parents have the right to insist their parishes and schools are in compliance with the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*. All parishes and schools should be able to show parents that the clergy, employees and volunteers who work with children are familiar with the warning signs of offenders, what to do if they have a concern about someone and how to report suspected abuse. In addition, a zero tolerance policy has been in place since 2002, which calls for the removal of any cleric against whom a credible accusation has been made regardless of when the offense occurred.

For additional information on this topic, visit the USCCB Web site www.usccb.org. A number of resources have been posted there in order to assist parents and parishes in creating safe environments for children and young people.

What does the charter say?

To read the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* in its entirety, go to www.usccb.org/ocyp/charter.shtml.