

March 29, 2004

Most Rev. Wilton D. Gregory, President
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
3211 Fourth Street NE
Washington DC 20017-1194

Dear Bishop Gregory:

We are concerned and find distressing the actions taken by the Administrative Committee of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops this past week to defer matters pertinent to the Office of Child and Youth Protection and the National Review Board until the November meeting. The decision, as you described it to Justice Burke, "was because the Administrative Committee did not feel competent to make a final decision on these matters without the full body of the bishops discussing these recommendations."

This course of action by the Administrative Committee, against the urging of the bishops' own Ad Hoc Committee, the National Advisory Council, and the National Review Board, will unduly delay and perhaps stymie the work mandated by the Charter. The practical effect of this decision by the Administrative Committee is that there will be no time to perform diocesan compliance audits in 2004. As you know, Article 8 of the Charter promises the Catholic faithful of the United States that the OCYP will produce "an annual public report of the progress made in implementing the standards in this Charter." Article 9 creates a National Review Board whose task it is to "approve the annual report of the implementation of the Charter in each of our dioceses/eparchies..." How can an annual report be prepared or approved without the information obtained by the audits?

While we believe that the inability to perform the required national 2004 diocesan audits is the most serious consequence of the Administrative Committee's decision to put everything off until November, there are other repercussions as well, not the least of which is to further delay the NRB's work of preparing and circulating an RFP for the Causes and Context study, also promised in the Charter.

Four of the NRB's members met with the Administrative Committee last Tuesday, March 23, 2004, and made presentations to the Committee. At that meeting, the National Advisory Council, the Office of Child and Youth Protection, the Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Abuse, and the National Review Board made three recommendations to the Administrative Committee: first, to approve an on-site audit of all dioceses to be completed by year's end by the

Office of Child and Youth Protection, second, to approve the funding for the National Review Board to prepare an RFP for the Causes and Context Study; and lastly, that the USCCB continue to deal with the issue of Fraternal Correction. At that time, every member of the Administrative Committee evidently had in front of him copies of letters from a few dozen bishops asking to delay matters until November. We find it more than disingenuous to have permitted our members to make their presentations to the Administrative Committee and never once bring up or mention the letters from some bishops asking to defer these matters until November. Also, from the dates on these letters, they were received at the USCCB before our press conference and the release of the reports on February 27, 2004. It is hard to reach any other conclusion than that the failure to tell the NRB of these matters in a timely fashion was to make sure that they did not come up in any discussions with the national media on February 27. In short, we were manipulated.

We believe that the work we have accomplished these past 22 months is perceived by the bishops as having successfully deflected extensive national criticism. In effect, they have "dodged the bullet," and they are anxious to put these matters behind them. It is our sincere advice to you and to your fellow bishops that the best way to get these matters behind us, a goal that we all want, is to follow scrupulously the promises of the Charter and the requirements of the Norms—including performing the annual audits. If not, you risk the characterization that, while public outrage was at its height, the bishops were willing to be honest and compliant, going so far as to enact the Charter and convene the NRB, but now they appear to be temporizing again, the same kind of temporizing that allowed this crisis to explode upon our Church in the first place.

We are very disheartened by this apparent decision to go back to "business as usual." To place everything on hold for eight months will undoubtedly have serious adverse repercussions both within and without the Church. Those who said that the bishops were never serious about breaking free from the sins, crimes and bad judgments of the past will be vindicated. A decision to backslide on the Charter and Norms—and it is hard to see the decision to delay matters until November as anything else—will delay the necessary healing and reopen the wounds of deception, manipulation and control—all the false ideals that produced this scandal.

This is a serious juncture. People of good faith were willing to give the bishops the benefit of the doubt over the handling of the crisis because it looked as though they had turned a corner and were serious about making changes. It would be shameful if we were now to discover that we were wrong about that commitment of our bishops. Needless-to-say, should that occur, the NRB would feel personally betrayed by such actions. But even more importantly, the wounded people-in-the-pews will find this reprehensible.

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We urge you to reconsider this action. We ask you to call for a vote of the entire USCCB by fax immediately to rescind the vote to defer discussion on the vital issues until November and to vote for the approval of the recommendations of the NRB immediately.

The members of the NRB find this matter extremely distressing. We ask that you send this letter to all the members of the USCCB and anxiously await your response before close of business Friday, April 2, 2004.

Sincerely,

Anne M. Burke
Interim Chair
For the Members of the
National Review Board

AMB: mfy