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Two-thirds of bishops let accused priests work

Spokesman: 'Prudent decisions' made amid abuse allegations

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Roughly two-thirds of the top U.S. Catholic leaders have allowed priests accused of sexual abuse to keep working, a practice that spans decades and continues today, a

three-month *Dallas Morning News* review shows.

Church spokesmen did not dispute the results of the study, which is the first of its kind and depicts a far broader pattern than has emerged this year in Boston. That archdiocese's employment of known child molesters has made

international news and led Pope John Paul II to summon American cardinals to Rome in April.

Now, with the world watching and the crisis deepening, members of the Catholic hierarchy are in Dallas to debate a draft policy on abuse — which does not address church leaders' roles in concealing or enabling it.

A few prosecutors around the country have begun examining bishops' actions, even as some representatives of the Vatican — which must approve any decisions made

this week — are suggesting that U.S. church leaders not cooperate fully with secular authorities.

Meanwhile, recent polls say that most American Catholics believe that church leaders involved in cover-ups should resign. Four bishops have resigned this year after being accused of sexual misconduct, including the head of the Diocese of Lexington, Ky., and an auxiliary bishop in New York on Tuesday. Others who previously quit have re-

See **PRIESTS** Page 24A

Priests kept working after allegations, even convictions

Continued from Page 1A

turned to ministry.

The News' review found that at least 111 of the nation's 178 mainstream, or Roman rite, Catholic dioceses are headed by men who have protected accused priests or other church figures, such as brothers in religious orders, candidates for the priesthood, teachers and youth-group workers. The study did not include about 100 other members of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, most of whom serve in supporting roles but can vote this week in Dallas.

The 111 bishops' involvement took many forms, from ignoring warnings about suspicious behavior to keeping priests on the job after admissions of wrongdoing, diagnoses of sexual disorders, legal settlements, even criminal convictions.

Among the 111 are all eight cardinals who lead American archdioceses, bishops in at least 40 states, and most members of the bishops committee that drafted the policy up for discussion. Many members of the predecessor committee — the bishops have been studying this matter for more than a decade and got their first detailed report on it in 1985 — also have employed accused priests.

The Rev. Francis Maniscalco, a spokesman for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, expressed no surprise at the numbers.

"Why should anybody's feet be held to the fire?" he asked. "The bishops made what they thought were prudent decisions at the time. The decisions were made on the best advice available.

"This is a very complex matter that the bishops have been trying to deal with for nearly 20 years," Monsignor Maniscalco said.

Dallas Coadjutor Bishop Joseph Galante, a member of the current abuse committee, acknowledged that some leaders repeatedly

reassigned men in spite of evidence that they were reoffending and that their therapy wasn't working.

"I can't defend that," he said. "It is not defensible."

Bishop Galante said he did not think any of his colleagues had put molesters back to work with "the intent of putting someone in danger. But the result has been that."

The problem, he said, is that "the sense of responsibility we had to the priest has failed to be balanced with the responsibility we have to the rest of the people."

Agonizing decisions

Monsignor Maniscalco noted that some suspended priests have won reinstatement from the Vatican, and that others went back to work with the consent — sometimes even at the insistence — of congregations.

Bishops, he said, have agonized about how to handle accusations, particularly when accusers didn't want to file civil or criminal charges. Sometimes the solution was to put priests in administrative jobs or adult-only ministries, he said.

Bishop Galante said he sees two shortcomings with that approach. One, he said, is "the affront to the victim," and the other is that the priests retain a social status that may help them gain access to children while technically off duty.

He explained the latter phenomenon through a lament another bishop shared with him many years ago, after reassigning pedophiles to nursing home chaplain jobs and similar posts: "The problem is they all have driver's licenses and cars."

The Rev. Thomas Doyle, who helped write the 1985 report to the bishops while working at the Vatican Embassy in Washington, said he thought numbers found in *The News'* study were low. Nevertheless, he said, the results point to a problem so pervasive that "the bishops don't know how to fix it."

Father Doyle now consults extensively with plaintiffs' attorneys and has broken with top church leaders, saying that they did nothing to address the issues he raised. He said he doubts the Dallas meeting will result in major reform.

"In the past, the bishops, the clerics from the pope on down, have said many positive, apologetic things, and they have not followed through," Father Doyle said. Just getting to this juncture, where the only item on the bishops' agenda is abuse, took "an avalanche of negative publicity that was followed by a tidal wave of more negative publicity that was accompanied by a massive hemorrhage of millions and millions of dollars."

What does he think it would take to bring about major change? "It will take one of them going to jail for cover-up and obstruction," said Father Doyle, a military chaplain who once screened American bishop candidates and was considered bishop material.

Bishop Galante, asked whether some diocesan leaders were too much a part of the problem to be part of the solution, replied: "Honestly don't know."

In recent months, many bishops have announced zero-tolerance policies, combed through personnel files and dismissed previously accused priests.

"I would be saddened and very much shocked," Bishop Galante said, "if there are still bishops so caught up in the old way that they can't see a new way."

Therapists' advice

In explaining why they let accused and even confirmed abusers keep working, bishops frequently give a two-part defense: They did what they did many years ago, relying on the advice of skilled therapists who had treated the priests.

Many cases coming to light involve decades-old allegations, and

many accused men were sent to treatment centers. But there is more to the story, documents and interviews show.

For starters, several bishops left suspect clergymen in parishes or transferred them in the late 1990s and beyond, after a landmark civil trial in Dallas' Rudy Kos case resulted in the largest clergy-abuse verdict in history. Sometimes they did so after allegations of recent misconduct.

In Alexandria, La., for example, Bishop Sam Jacobs returned the Rev. John Andries to a parish after a 1998 fondling accusation. By last year, Father Andries was in trouble again, criminally charged with touching and masturbating onto a sleeping boy at his rural home.

And in southern Oklahoma, the Rev. James Rapp stayed on the job until 1999, five years after a previous boss in Michigan told Oklahoma City Archbishop Eusebius Beltran that the priest had been treated for a sexual disorder. During those five years, Father Rapp molested at least one boy and has since been sent to prison.

When it comes to the question of medical advice, Richard Sipe, a prominent Catholic therapeutic expert, acknowledges that psychiatry has advanced in recent decades and better understands the intractability of abusers.

But the bishops' insistence on this point, he argues, obscures a larger one: that church leaders rarely alerted police and sometimes pressed victims not to, allowing criminals to escape the consequences of their crimes.

"Is there any bishop who didn't know this was illegal?" asks Mr. Sipe, a married ex-priest who has reviewed case histories on hundreds of abusive clergy. As a priest and as a layman, he has advised Catholic leaders on how to deal with offenders.

Mr. Sipe also said many bishops

have seemed more interested in putting their priests back to work than making sure it was safe to do so. Some bishops, he said, sent abusers to therapists who lacked specialized training, or withheld information from professionals to minimize the seriousness of a situation. Some simply did not heed experts' recommendations or warnings, as seen from testimony in the Kos case and other lawsuits.

Finally, Mr. Sipe said, some treatment centers that bishops used were staffed in part with priests who were accused of abuse.

Similar scenarios have been revealed recently in Boston: Molesters were moved from parishes to diocesan headquarters, where they made decisions affecting more recently accused priests. And in Cleveland, one accused priest was told to monitor another, who had been reassigned to his church. They have since been accused in a lawsuit of ganging up on a boy in a shower there.

Keeping details hidden

Other themes that emerged from a database *The News* compiled:

■ Despite pledges of openness from Bishop Wilton Gregory of Belleville, Ill., who heads the national conference of bishops, some Catholic leaders have failed to provide a complete picture of clergy abuse in their dioceses.

In March, for example, Bishop William Curlin of Charlotte, N.C. announced that he had "zero tolerance for child sex abuse" and that the only misconduct case he knew about in the area happened a half-century ago. A month later came the news that Bishop Curlin had reassigned a priest in 1997 after paying a settlement to one victim.

The bishop of Evansville, Ind., Gerald Gettelfinger, made a similar no-tolerance pronouncement this spring, then soon admitted he had

at least three accused priests in parishes. One had a child-pornography conviction. Another had been sent to treatment twice and still wasn't obeying orders not to work closely with children. His accusers included his nephew.

Still other church leaders, such as Indianapolis Archbishop Daniel Buechlein, have refused to say anything about what they've done with accused priests.

■ Some prelates continue to keep evidence of sexual abuse hidden from law enforcement authorities.

Omaha, Neb., Archbishop Elden Curtiss didn't tell police last year when a priest admitted viewing child pornography on a work computer, a prosecutor has said. The archbishop transferred the man from one Catholic school to another, and criminal charges resulted only after a lay teacher bypassed the archbishop and alerted authorities.

Archbishop Curtiss has since been investigated for possible witness tampering after he sought the whistle-blower's resignation. He has apologized and won't be charged, the prosecutor said.

■ Some church leaders, through action or inaction, have helped criminally accused priests leave the country.

Several — from Texas, California, North Dakota, New Jersey and elsewhere — remain at large. Another is in South America, where he got a job after a molestation conviction in New York. A bishop there wrote the priest a job recommendation after he had been indicted. The priest is under house arrest, accused of molesting more children in Colombia.

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