

## **Bishop says church credibility 'zilch' if abuse audits were to stop**

By Tracy Early  
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NEW YORK (CNS) -- Auxiliary Bishop Joseph M. Sullivan of Brooklyn said May 21 that if the bishops do not continue with their sexual abuse audits "our credibility will be zilch."

He noted that some bishops thought the audits, undertaken as part of the implementation of the 2002 "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People," were too burdensome and wanted to end them now.

One audit has been completed. The U.S. bishops' Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Abuse and the National Review Board reached an agreement May 17 on proposals for conducting a second diocesan audit of child sex abuse prevention policies and on doing a study of the causes and context of the crisis.

The bishops will discuss the proposals during their June 14-19 meeting in Denver.

The agreement came after strong criticism by Justice Anne Burke, interim chairwoman of the review board, that the bishops were trying to delay a decision on doing the audits until November. Burke had also complained that some bishops were having second thoughts about independent monitoring by the review board on compliance with the sex abuse policies.

Bishop Sullivan said the sex abuse scandal had already done "enormous damage" to the bishops' credibility and affected their ability now to get public support for their position against providing contraceptives for employees of Catholic hospitals and other social agencies.

The bishop made his comments in delivering the concluding address to the annual weeklong Catholic Healthcare Administrative Personnel program at St. John's University in New York.

CHAP, marking its 20th anniversary this year, began in September 1984 as a joint venture of St. John's and the Catholic Medical Center of Brooklyn and Queens, now part of St. Vincent Catholic Medical Centers.

Sister Annelle Fitzpatrick, a Sister of St. Joseph who directs the program as a St. Vincent staff member, said this year's session drew about 50 participants from a dozen or more states, plus Canada, Ireland and Australia.

Sister Fitzpatrick said the program, which was initially given twice a year, had attracted more than a thousand people involved in Catholic health care, including some non-Catholics.

Bishop Sullivan's address was directed primarily to the challenge presented to the Catholic Church by California and New York state laws requiring church hospitals and other social service agencies that provide prescription benefits for employees to include contraceptives.

"The question is, will we go out of business on this issue?" he said.

Bishop Sullivan said he would fight "to the end" to keep the church in health care ministry, but not at the price of sacrificing principle.

The church "lost big time" in a decision of the California Supreme Court March 1 to uphold that state's Women's Contraceptive Equality Act, which requires that health insurance for employees include contraceptives.

Exemption is provided for "religious employers," but these are defined as institutions directly engaged in furthering religious belief and made up primarily of members of the religious group.

Bishop Sullivan said Catholics define themselves differently than do the courts because they conduct their ministries with religious motivation but extend services to everyone.

"It is unconscionable that the government has tried to define what it means to be Catholic," he said.

Bishop Sullivan said the courts would let church agencies avoid paying for contraceptives if they gave employees no health insurance at all. But Catholic agencies believe employers are morally obligated to provide health benefits, he said.

Another option would be giving up government funding for these agencies, but he said hospitals could not exist without the money that comes from Medicare and Medicaid patients.

A law similar to that in California was passed in New York state in 2002 and challenged in court by a number of New York Catholic and Baptist organizations.

Supreme Court Judge Daniel Lamont upheld the law, the Women's Health and Wellness Act, in a decision Nov. 25. On Dec. 19 the plaintiffs filed a notice of appeal with the New York State Supreme Court Appellate Division, the second level in the state's three-tier court system.

Suggesting that mandates for abortion and other practices unacceptable to the church would follow the contraceptives laws, Bishop Sullivan said the bishops hoped to get a general exemption from the federal government on a conscience basis, but were unsure whether an appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court would bring an acceptable decision. A constitutional amendment seems unlikely, he added.

He said "the debate is only beginning," and it was "up in the air" whether the church could get the exemption.

A problem for the church is that "our adversaries are better organized," Bishop Sullivan said. "They are focused, and they are powerful politically."

He said bishops are obligated to teach the Catholic view of the truth, regardless of how many people might disagree, but that they are handicapped in the public arena by the failure of many church members to support them.

"We haven't educated our people," he said.