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Church Audits Don't Allay Fears

Victim Advocates Say `Self Reporting' Inadequate Response To Clergy Offenses

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By FRANCES GRANDY TAYLOR, Courant Staff Writer

Despite the piles of data on sexual abuse by clergy in the Catholic Church being released annually, victims' advocates continue to express disappointment with the process, charging that the U.S. bishops' "self-reported" audits have not provided the answers that advocates seek.

In addition, a change in the reporting method that begins this year means that only dioceses that failed to meet the guidelines set forth by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops for reporting and handling allegations of sexual abuse will get field visits. The rest of the dioceses will simply audit themselves.

About 90 percent of the nation's 195 dioceses - including Hartford, Bridgeport and Norwich - have complied with the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People that the bishops conference established in 2002 to address the sexual abuse crisis.

David Clohessy, national director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, or SNAP, said the shift from the original auditing process to self-surveys will make what was a bad situation worse.

"Right now we have admitted abusive clergy walking the streets, moving to new states and foreign countries where people don't know about them," Clohessy said.

He said the case of former Springfield Bishop Thomas Dupre highlights the system's deficiencies. Dupre resigned in 2004 and entered treatment in Maryland in February 2004 after two men accused him of molesting them when they were teenage altar boys. The Springfield audit, which says the diocese is in compliance with the bishops' charter, does not mention Dupre's departure or the charges against him.

"To me, it's a very telling example of the inadequacies of these guidelines," Clohessy said. "It's not known where [Dupre] is. He could be living in an apartment babysitting his neighbors' children right now."

Landa Mauriello-Vernon, president of the Connecticut chapter of SNAP, criticized the 2004 report, which was released Feb. 18, and the planned changes for 2005 audits.

She called on the Bridgeport diocese to release the names of priests in cases where the diocese has paid to settle abuse claims, charging that some are still in ministry.

"There is no excuse for that," Mauriello-Vernon said.

Joseph McAleer, spokesman for the Bridgeport diocese, said: "We have said, publicly many times, there is no priest or deacon in active ministry in the Diocese of Bridgeport who poses a threat of any kind to anyone, young or old."

He also said the diocese has exceeded the requirements of the charter and will continue to comply fully.

"Moving forward, whether we have an independent audit or a self-audit, we will build upon our record," McAleer said. He said the diocese remains committed to respond to every allegation, to reach out to victims, to conduct mandatory awareness training and background checks, and to communicate openly and honestly.

Mauriello-Vernon praised the Norwich diocese for its recent decision to make public the name of a priest accused of past sexual misconduct with minors, calling it "a step in the right direction."

But she said that bishops and survivors of sexual abuse continue to talk past one another. Survivors don't just want a tally of numbers, Mauriello-Vernon said. They also want expressions of compassion.

She said the Hartford Archdiocese missed an opportunity in the case of a New Britain priest, the Rev. Roman Kramek, who was sentenced to serve nine months in prison for sexual assaulting a 17-year-old female parishioner and will then be deported to his native Poland.

"[Archbishop Henry J. Mansell] should have stepped up and said, 'We support this girl,'" Mauriello-Vernon said.

The case divided the Polish community parish, with some raising hundred of dollars for the priest's legal costs. Mauriello-Vernon said her group will attempt to notify authorities in Poland about Kramek's conviction when he returns there.

The case "was like stepping into the past, back to a time when people didn't believe these things could happen," she said.

The recent report found that in 2004 more than 600 priests and deacons were accused of sexually abusing minors, with the majority of the allegations stemming from incidents that occurred prior to 1974. Many of the accused priests had died or already been removed from ministry when the allegations were received in 2004.

The report also said that in 2004 the Catholic Church spent \$19.8 million for training and background checks, and \$139.6 million for legal settlements, victim and offender treatment and attorneys' fees.

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