

Diocese of Denial: Good on DA for investigating church

Opinion - Editorials

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Dallas Catholics no longer have to rely on Bishop Charles Grahmann's shaky word that their priests have clean sex-abuse records. Dallas County District Attorney Bill Hill has opened an investigation of the diocese to see if the bishop is sitting on allegations of clerical sex abuse he's not reported to authorities.

This is great news. Bishop Grahmann's assurances that this diocese has no priests in ministry who had been credibly accused of sexual misconduct with minors have been called into question by events in Rockwall.

Brooks Egerton reported in yesterday's Dallas Morning News the existence of sworn affidavits from 1994 alleging that Father Bill Richard, who resigned on Sunday from Our Lady of the Lake parish in Rockwall, sexually harassed and intimidated boys at Bishop Lynch High School and St. Mark's parish in Plano. It does not appear at this point that the diocese investigated the accusations, which Father Richard denied – nor did the diocese report these accusations to state officials, as the law seems to require.

Moreover, in 2002, Bishop Grahmann said that his people combed clergy personnel records "for any indication of violations of state laws relating to minors" and removed from ministry priests who had them. Somehow, Father Richard got to keep his post. And a 2003 outside audit overlooked him, even as it praised the Dallas diocese's "Safe Environment" program as a national model.

Did Father Richard's files fall through the cracks – or was he being protected? Are there more Father Richards in this diocese? The DA is on the case.

Diocesan spokesman Bronson Havard yesterday cited "major inaccuracies" in The News report and indicated that a fuller response will come later. Good, because Bishop Grahmann owes the public an explanation. Absent a credible accounting, the lesson here is: A diocesan child-protection program is only as trustworthy as the bishop who administers it. Parents, take note.

Bishop Grahmann has had numerous chances to clean up the diocese's act and to make Dallas churches safe for kids. It's a sad and shameful thing, but the church cannot police itself, the public interest demands that civil authorities do it for them.