

WORLD & NATION

Bishops to consider laicizing abusive priests

By Jerry Filteau
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — The national sex-abuse policy the U.S. bishops will be asked to approve in Dallas June 13-15 calls for laicizing any priest or deacon who commits even one act of abuse of a minor in the future.

It also calls for laicizing anyone who has committed more than one abusive act in the past or who is diagnosed as a pedophile.

For a one-time past offender who has been treated, it calls for stringent review by a predominantly lay diocesan review board to determine whether he can be returned to any kind of ministry. Such a review would include hearing from the victim. If the former abuser should receive any new assignment, it would be under restrictive conditions and with full disclosure "to those with whom he will live and serve."

Whenever an accusation is made in the future, if the victim is still a minor the proposal would require the diocese to report it to civil authorities, even in states where this is not required by law.

The proposal would establish a national Office for Child and Youth Protection in the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, to be assisted and monitored by a national review board appointed by Bishop Wilton D. Gregory of Belleville, Ill., USCCB president.

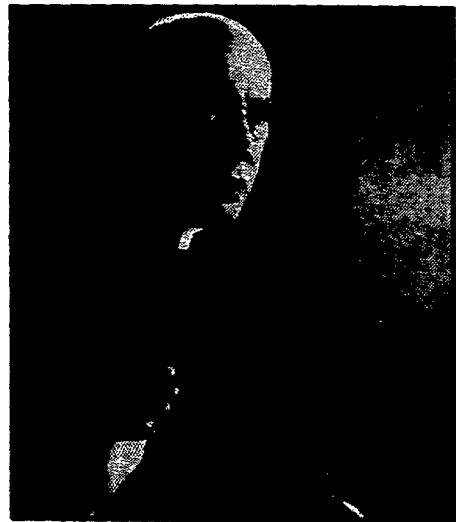
It calls for a commission to research how the U.S. church has responded to the problem.

Confidentiality agreements — once standard procedure in settling such cases, but much criticized in the crisis of recent months — would be strongly discouraged.

The 3,000-word proposal is titled "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People." The nation's bishops are to debate and vote on it when they meet in Dallas. To give adequate attention to the issue, they have removed almost everything else from the meeting's agenda.

The bishops are to vote separately on a shorter legal document expressing the policy canonically in binding legislation, which also must be approved by the Holy See.

The proposed charter was developed by the bishops' Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Abuse, chaired by Archbishop Harry J. Flynn of St. Paul-Minneapolis. He presented it at a media briefing June 4.



Dave Hirbecak/CNS

Archbishop Harry J. Flynn is chairman of the U.S. bishops' Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Abuse.

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The policy norms are divided into 18 articles set out under four headings: promoting healing and reconciliation with victims, guaranteeing an effective response to allegations, assuring accountability, and protecting children and youth in the future.

The three-article section on healing and reconciliation opens with a basic commitment to "reach out to victim/survivors and their families and communicate sincere commitment to their spiritual and emotional well-being."

It calls for every diocese to develop outreach to all sexual-abuse victims of church personnel, present or past.

Article 2 calls for every diocese to "have in place the mechanisms to respond promptly to any allegation," including a trained assistance coordinator and a "review board, the majority of whom will be lay persons not in the employ of the diocese" to assess allegations, monitor policy and procedures and advise the bishop.

The first two articles on guaranteeing an effective response to allegations deal with the civil reporting norms and the removal of priests who abuse. The latter cites Pope John Paul II's declaration that "there is no place in the priesthood or religious life for those who would harm the young" as grounds henceforth for laicizing anyone who abuses even once.

A key article in the response section expands beyond abuse of minors to address the need for clear standards of ministerial behavior in areas such as sexual harass-

ment or sexual misconduct "involving young women and men who have recently attained legal adulthood."

Another article addresses the need for "a communications policy that reflects a commitment to transparency and openness."

Articles 8-12 address accountability.

The last six articles, devoted to future prevention of sex abuse, address:

- "Safe environment" programs of education and training against sex abuse in all dioceses.

- Evaluation and screening for all church personnel who have contact with children.

- Rules for background reporting from the sending bishop or religious superior concerning any cleric proposed for assignment, transfer or residence in a different diocese.

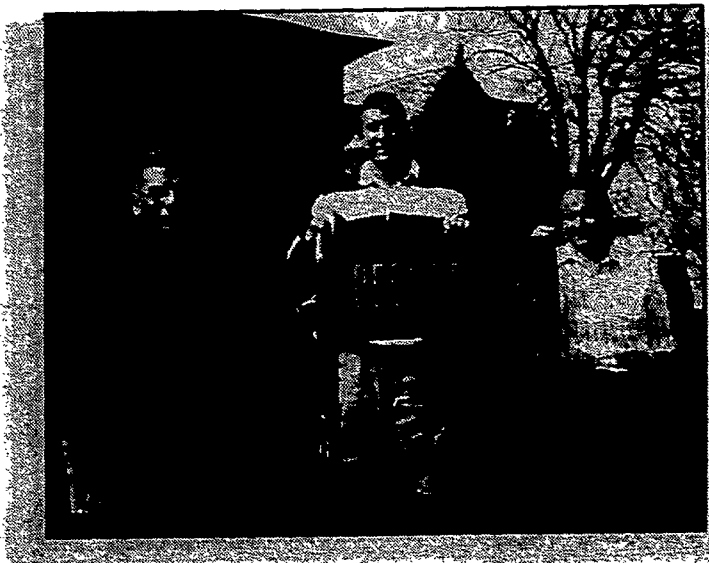
- Regular meetings of bishops and religious superiors concerning their respective roles when an allegation is made against a member of a religious order.

- Cooperation with other churches and social institutions to combat sexual abuse of minors throughout society.

- Support for a new apostolic visitation of all U.S. seminaries, as proposed by the Vatican summit in April.

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