

Bishop of Phoenix resigns

PHOENIX (CNS) — Bishop Thomas J. O'Brien, whose resignation as head of the Phoenix Diocese was accepted by the Vatican June 18, said he made the decision to resign with "a heavy heart and great sorrow."

A day before his resignation was accepted, he was formally charged with a felony of leaving the scene of a hit-and-run accident in which Jim L. Reed, 43, was killed. The accident was June 14, and two days later police arrested Bishop O'Brien on the felony charge.

His statement, released June 18 after the Vatican announced the pope had accepted his resignation, noted that the church "isn't one person. It is the Catholic people, the priests, and yes, the bishop."

"I have shepherded the Phoenix Diocese for more than 20 years and it has always been my desire that the focus be on the good works of the church in the community and not myself," he added.

Bishop O'Brien thanked the many people in the diocese who had supported him "through good times and bad" and noted that the past year has "been very painful."

"It became apparent that as long

as I remained bishop the focus of the news media would be on me and not the church and her people," he said. "My heart is aching, but I felt I needed to step aside for you, the Catholic people, to allow the diocese to heal from what has been a painful time in our history."

The bishop's arrest and felony charge followed by two weeks an agreement announced by Bishop O'Brien and Maricopa County Attorney Richard Romley which said the bishop would avoid criminal prosecution for obstruction of justice over the way he handled cases of sexual abuse by priests. The agreement required the bishop to delegate a "moderator of the curia" to take over certain administrative duties, including revising and enforcing policies on sex abuse.

In his statement, Bishop O'Brien added that he has much respect for Archbishop Michael J. Sheehan of Santa Fe, N.M., who has been appointed apostolic administrator of the Phoenix Diocese and will oversee it until a new bishop is named. He said he was grateful for the archbishop's willingness to "shepherd the diocese through this transitional period."

Archbishop Sheehan arrived in Phoenix June 18 and, during a press conference, said he came to the diocese to "be a man of hope and healing."

In an earlier statement about the situation in the Phoenix Diocese, he said he grieved with Bishop O'Brien and the local church and that his heart goes out to all victims and their families.

Members of Bishop O'Brien's family also released a statement June 18 saying they extended their prayers and sympathy to Reed's family and friends.

"We are so sorry for their pain and loss," said the statement, read by Jim Dearing, a nephew of Bishop O'Brien, on behalf of the bishop's sister and other family members. "This is a horrible tragedy for everyone — the Reed family, our family, the bishop and the entire Catholic community."

"We are held together by faith and our belief in God," it continued. "We are not of the same faith as Mr. Reed, but we all share the same God."

A statement by Richard Jeffrey, state deputy of the Arizona Knights of Columbus, said the recent events



Reuters/CNS

Archbishop Michael J. Sheehan of Santa Fe, N.M., shown addressing the media June 18, was appointed administrator of the Phoenix Diocese after Bishop Thomas J. O'Brien resigned.

in the diocese should prompt Phoenix Catholics to "respond with all the power of our Catholic faith."

He also urged Catholics to pray for Reed and his family.

Jeffrey said the church in Phoenix "cannot be neglected at this time" and that "no matter what happens, the church will continue her mission. And in the end, she will prevail, even in these sad and tragic days."

Bishops discuss study of clerical sexual abuse

Jerry Filteau/CNS

ST. LOUIS — Reporters were excluded from the U.S. bishops' afternoon session June 19, but at press conferences afterward they were told that a national study of the extent of sexual abuse of minors by clergy was the main topic discussed.

At one press conference, Robert Bennett, a member of the National Review Board monitoring how well bishops deal with sexual abuse and child protection, praised recently resigned board chairman Frank Keating but distanced himself and the board from Keating's remarks comparing some unnamed bishops with the Mafia.

"Obviously, we wouldn't be here if bishops had not made mistakes in varying degrees. ... But to suggest that this is a criminal organization is beyond the pale," he said. "It was an inappropriate remark by Mr. Keating and the board does not associate with it."

"I honestly thought his remarks were most unfortunate," said Rochester Bishop Matthew H. Clark, adding that he was not surprised by Keating's resignation.

Bishop Wilton D. Gregory of Belleville, Ill., president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, praised Keating's contributions to the board but called him "a man of strong opinions" who often expresses himself bluntly.

Under a long-standing policy, when the bishops meet in executive session the proceedings are off the record and not made public. But it was clear from that press conference and another immediately thereafter that the three-hour afternoon session had been devoted to the issue of clergy sexual abuse, especially to questions the bishops had about a study on the extent of clerical sexual abuse of minors in the U.S. Catholic Church from 1950 through 2002.

The study will be based on detailed surveys recently sent out to every U.S. diocese by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. About two-thirds of U.S. dioceses have returned their responses. The Diocese of Rochester returned its survey in May, according to Father Daniel J. Condon, diocesan chancellor.

Controversy over the survey

made national news the week before the bishops met in St. Louis when Keating, a former governor of Oklahoma, publicly criticized the California bishops for not answering the surveys.

In the flap that followed, the bishops defended their position on grounds that without changes in the study's protocols, respondents from California would be in violation of that state's tough confidentiality laws. Keating stood by his comments but resigned from the board, stating he had been planning to do so anyway after leading the board through its first year.

"I think the bishops have demonstrated a tremendous commitment to the (abuse) charter, and I'm not sure the governor had a full appreciation of the operative laws in many parts of our country and the differing pastoral situations," Bishop Clark said.

In a statement distributed June 19 to media covering the bishops' meeting, the California Catholic Conference — the public policy organization of that state's bishops — said that a "very productive meeting with John Jay College researchers"

had led to a resolution of their legal problems with the survey protocol.

At the second press conference following the bishops' executive session on the John Jay study, Bishop Sylvester D. Ryan of Monterey, president of the California Catholic Conference, said the solution involved changing the reporting process "so that information that needs protection (to meet the state's legal confidentiality requirements) is converted to a number" that cannot be converted back to identify the individual accused cleric or alleged victim being profiled in a survey form.

Although press conference panelists declined to discuss details of the protocol at issue, Catholic News Service learned that the questionnaires profiling clerics accused of abuse asked for each to be identified by first and last initials, birth date and year of ordination. That data was to be encrypted by the researchers, but someone who could decode the encryption would have enough information to identify the accused cleric.

Contains reporting by Rob Cullivan in Rochester.

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