

# U.S. bishops take action to respond to church abuse crisis

BALTIMORE (CNS) – During the June 11-13 spring assembly of the U.S. bishops in Baltimore, it was clear the bishops had to respond to the sexual abuse crisis in the church – and on the last day of their gathering they approved a series of procedures to begin this process.

On June 13, they voted to implement the document “Vos Estis Lux Mundi” (“You are the light of the world”), issued by Pope Francis in May to help the Catholic Church safeguard its members from abuse and hold its leaders accountable.

The bishops also approved the document “Acknowledging Our Episcopal Commitments” and promised to hold themselves accountable to the commitments of the charter, including a zero-tolerance policy for abuse. The document says any codes of conduct in their respective dioceses regarding clergy apply to bishop as well.

They voted in favor of the item “protocol regarding available nonpenal restrictions on bishops,” which outlines what canonical options are available to bishops when a retired bishop resigns or is removed “due to sexual misconduct with adults or grave negligence of office, or where subsequent to his resignation he was found to have so acted or failed to act.”

Their first action was a vote June 12 to authorize the implementation of a third-party system that would allow people to make confidential reports of abuse complaints against bishops through a toll-free telephone number and online. The system, which would be operated by an outside vendor contracted by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, should

be in place no later than May 31, 2020.

During the first day of the assembly, several speakers discussed the challenge ahead and the need for the bishops to be both transparent and reliant upon lay leadership. The bishops also examined their plans to vote on procedures and policies in response to the abuse crisis, including some they had put aside during their fall general assembly in November at the Vatican's request.

The bishops' postponement of voting on these procedures was addressed from the meeting's onset June 11 in a message from Archbishop Christophe Pierre, the Vatican's nuncio to the United States.

He noted that there were "some expressions of 'dissent'" by some U.S. bishops at the previous assembly about postponing votes on items related to the reemergent clergy sexual abuse crisis, but he also stressed that "unity prevails over conflict."

"Working together provides us with the opportunity to speak and to listen," said the message from Archbishop Pierre, read by Msgr. Walter Erbi, charge d'affaires at the Vatican's nunciature in Washington. Archbishop Pierre was at the Vatican for a nuncio meeting.

Archbishop Pierre's message said that despite the desire among U.S. bishops in November to act quickly to address new crises on clergy sex abuse, the postponement of the votes on the issue allowed the U.S. church to participate more fully at the Vatican's February summit on the protection of minors.

"One of the reasons the Holy Father asked for a delay was that the whole church needed to walk together, to work in a synodal way," Archbishop Pierre said, "with the guidance of the Holy Spirit to make the path forward clearer."

Moving forward was certainly a theme of the assembly, echoed

by National Review Board chairman Francesco Cesareo June 11, who called for a greater role for laity in investigating allegations of abuse or reaction to reports of abuse against bishops.

Cesareo also said National Review Board members recommend a thorough review of the "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People" and a revision in the audit process regarding diocesan implementation of the charter, which governs the church's response to clergy abuse allegations.

"A strengthened audit would provide a means for improving your dioceses' existing methods to protect and heal," Cesareo said. "Virtually all your dioceses, including those where problems came to light under the microscope of the media and attorney generals, have easily passed the audit for years, since the bar currently is so low. Now is the time to raise the bar on compliance to ensure the mistakes of the past are not repeated."

Cesareo also recommended that the charter "should be revised immediately to explicitly include bishops and demand for greater accountability."

"You have a great opportunity," he said, "to lead by example and help show dioceses and episcopal conferences around the world not only how important it is for lay involvement to ensure greater accountability and transparency, but also how laity and the episcopacy can be co-responsible for the church's well-being."

Both the National Review Board and the National Advisory Council pressed the bishops to encourage Vatican officials to release documents regarding the investigation of misconduct by Theodore E. McCarrick, the former cardinal who was laicized earlier this year. The allegations against him were made public nearly a year ago on June 20, 2018.

The bishops also discussed the upcoming election, the crisis

at the border and the issue of young adults leaving the church.

They were urged to do more to support the suffering of immigrant families, to be with them spiritually as pastors and to voice support for legal measures to help them.

"It's so important that our works match our words on this issue," said Bishop Jaime Soto of Sacramento, California, June 11 after a presentation by the working group on immigration issues for the USCCB.

Two bishop members of the group, Archbishop Jose H. Gomez of Los Angeles and Bishop Joe S. Vasquez of Austin, Texas, gave an update of what the U.S. church is doing at the national level and in certain regions of the country on immigration issues.

Bishop Vasquez urged the group to "redouble efforts to offer spiritual support and access to legal and social services to affected families," saying it is "vital that they feel supported by the church during this time of uncertainty."

Auxiliary Bishop Robert E. Barron of Los Angeles, chairman of the bishops' Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis, spoke about an upcoming presentation at the fall meeting on how to respond to the growing number of young people leaving the church.

He said getting the religiously unaffiliated, or "nones," particularly young people, back to the Catholic Church, should be a top priority for the church, noting that 50% of Catholics age 30 and younger have left the church.

"Half the kids that we baptized and confirmed in the last 30 years are now ex-Catholics or unaffiliated," he said, and "one out of six millennials in the U.S. is now a former Catholic."

In anticipation of the 2020 presidential election, the U.S.

bishops' quadrennial document that provides guidance to voters on Catholic social teaching won't change, but it will be supplemented by a brief letter and four 90-second videos that reflect the teaching of Pope Francis, the bishops were told.

A small group of no more than 10 protesters stood in largely silent protest June 11 outside the hotel where the meeting was taking place. One of the group's demands was that the bishops report abuse claims first to law enforcement.

"We don't think the church can police themselves," said Becky Ianni, director of Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests for the Washington area.

At the bishops' Mass at the end of the first day of the spring assembly, Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo of Galveston-Houston and president of the USCCB, spoke about the challenges faced by early Christians and urged the bishops to follow the example of Barnabas in the Acts of the Apostles who was respected and trusted.

"Today we honor Barnabas in our desire to do God's will and to do it carefully and with discretion but also with what the Holy Father calls boldness – apostolic boldness," he said.

On the meeting's final day, the bishops also approved wording to keep treatment of the death penalty in the U.S. Catechism for Adults in line with the revised universal catechism.

During the second day of their meeting, the bishops met by regions and provinces in the morning. In the afternoon, they not only voted on the national hotline, but they also approved by electronic vote:

- Strategic priorities for the 2021-24 USCCB Strategic Plan, in a provisional vote.
- The second edition of the National Directory for the Formation, Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons in the

United States for use in U.S. dioceses.

– An update to texts last changed in 2003 for the ordination of clergy. The action still requires confirmation by the Vatican.

The bishops also gave their assent by voice vote for the Diocese of Marquette, Michigan, to continue to pursue the sainthood cause of Irving “Francis” C. Houle, a man from Michigan who was said to have received the stigmata 16 years before he died in 2009, but who well before that had “many extraordinary physical and spiritual healings” attributed to him, according to a biography.