

Bishops need to do more

Editorial

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Posted: Feb. 24, 2005

The report last week by the Roman Catholic Church that it received 1,092 new allegations of sexual abuse of children against at least 756 priests and deacons in 2004 highlights how much work remains to be done by the nation's bishops in bringing this scandal under control. The good news is that church officials appear to recognize the reality: "The crisis of sexual abuse of minors within the Catholic Church is not over," one official said. The bad news is that it's not clear what additional steps the bishops are willing to take.

In fact, as we noted in December, church officials are moving to reduce the number of on-site audits of dioceses and their child protection programs. Given the history of coverup by officials and that allegations continue to be made about abuse that occurred in the 1960s and '70s, one would think it would be in the church's interest to continue on-site inspections. Such inspections would be in the church's interest because they could serve to reassure parishioners that the church is willing to do what is necessary to protect children.

Such reassurance seems necessary: A recent survey showed that the bishops' approval rating among Catholics was at 57% last fall, the lowest since the clergy sex abuse scandal broke in 2002. The survey also showed that parishioners are uneasy about the church's finances and that although the amount of money being given to the church remains steady, donations are coming from fewer people.

A recent court case filed in Wisconsin also shows why parishioners need a little more assurance in concrete terms. The civil suit alleges fraud against the Milwaukee Archdiocese in the case of an altar boy allegedly abused in the mid-1970s by Sigfried Widera, a priest later transferred to California. According to church documents filed with the suit, archdiocesan officials declined to notify police of the abuse and persuaded the boy's mother to stay quiet about the incident.

It's important to note that archdiocesan policy for some time has been to notify authorities in all such cases. But the suit's allegations are still disturbing. The very people parishioners trusted to protect their children actively engaged in a coverup to protect the priest and the church at the expense of children. After his transfer to California, Widera reportedly molested at least nine other children. He committed suicide in 2003.

Two years of inspections by an agency hired by the nation's bishops are insufficient to re-establish the trust that many parishioners appear to have lost. Tougher inspections - perhaps even by watchdogs not hired by the church - and full disclosure of the names of clergy and of the accusations against them would be a good start.

We believe that most church officials are sincerely interested in achieving a measure of justice for victims of past abuse and in protecting today's children. But the previous actions of some officials naturally makes some people question that sincerity.

If church officials really want to ease those doubts, they need to reassure through deeds, not words.