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Is church punishing volunteers?

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Ripped by sex scandals and revelations of thousands of priests abusing thousands children for decades, the Catholic Church is getting tough.

On parishioners.

The church already requires every employee to be vigorously examined just short of genetic testing. Now even church volunteers are told to turn their head and cough if they have more than casual contact with kids.

Volunteers who deal routinely with minors seem OK with this. They willingly submit in the name of keeping children safe, despite the fact that the real lightning rods haven't been volunteers, but priests who marauded at will while church heads either didn't know, knew but didn't do anything, or knew and covered guilty tracks.

But volunteers at one church in Newport News are hopping mad that their pastor is applying the screening not just to volunteers who come into routine contact with children, but to everyone. If you pull weeds alone in a garden, you're screened. Sing in the adult choir, screened. Count money in a locked building, screened. Volunteers dropped out in droves.

"There are a lot of unhappy campers," said one parishioner at St. Jerome Catholic Church who asked not to be named for fear of repercussions within the church. Let's call her "Mary."

"It was a very participatory church and congregation, so it's very frustrating when you have something that's been pretty much a part of you for so long yanked out from under you because of a piece of paper."

Now, before you whip out your tiny violins to serenade poor Mary, let me tell you about this piece of paper. It authorizes the diocese to investigate your "background, references, character, past employment, education, criminal or police records, including those maintained by both public and private organizations and all public records."

It promises nothing in return, and indeed absolves the diocese in advance "from any and all liabilities, claims or lawsuits in regards to the information obtained." It says nothing about safeguarding confidential information, doesn't say where it will be kept, who will have access to it or what will eventually become of it.

"It's stunningly broad," said Hampton attorney Bob Boester after I asked for a quick appraisal. "I appreciate what they're trying to do, (but) the danger of the volunteers here is quite substantial. There's nothing here about the files being maintained or used for whatever purpose. There's no way I would ever sign this."

Not every pastor requires every volunteer to do so.

"The policy, like any policy, is an overall policy of what must be done," said Monsignor Michael McCarron at Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Newport News. "The interpretation of that policy to some degree must be left to the people who are employing it."

At his parish, McCarron said, he applies it as diocese guidelines indicate, to any volunteer "who has any possibility of any contact with youth in a prolonged fashion." Adult choir members, for instance, are not routinely screened at Mount Carmel.

St. Jerome parishioners say they suggested altering the form to address their concerns, or applying it more judiciously, but their pastor, the Rev. Joseph Majewski, refused.

On Thursday, Majewski said he was surprised some parishioners are still upset. "I'm just following what the diocese says," he said, referring all other questions to the diocese. The bishop's spokesman in Richmond, the Rev. Pasquale "Pat" Apuzzo, didn't return calls for comment.

In an undated letter to Apuzzo about the screening policy, Majewski noted "the turmoil it has caused" in his parish.

He added that, in a parish as large as his, "it is difficult to ascertain which volunteers are and which volunteers are not routinely involved with the children of the parish. With this in mind and in an effort to provide every safeguard to our children, I have required all volunteers of the parish to complete and return the Volunteer Select Applications before September 1, 2003."

In a letter to Majewski dated July 31, 2003, Apuzzo commends the "diligence with which you and your staff are implementing this policy, not only to protect children and young people, but also to give the clear message that the Diocese and its institutions are no place for those who would harm the young to find either toleration or refuge."

The media, said an angry parishioner I'll call "Joseph," have been "discussing what the clergy have been doing to children over the last 50 years and what the bishops have been doing to sweep it under the rug. Now they're asking us to trust them with financial and other information. Then they say we're paranoid."

Just last week this same diocese announced it had documented 19 priests accused of sexually abusing 24 children between 1950 and 2002.

"The church has always had a very welcoming feeling," said angry parishioner "Dolores." A volunteer for decades, Dolores said she stewed for a long time before reluctantly signing the form. "Because I thought I've got to trust. I've served on so many committees that helped make that church a welcoming place, I felt if I didn't sign the form, I would have started to lose my faith ... turned against our priest."

"In the interest of making the place safer for children," said Joseph, "this pastor has alienated and destroyed a lot of people who were performing well and safely in ministries.

"He may have the right to do it. The question is, is it the right thing to do? Is it morally right? Is it Christian?"