

2-5-08 - Bishops support bill on abusers  
LOUISVILLE (KY), THE COURIER-JOURNAL, by Peter Smith

Bishops support bill on abusers  
Failure to report also is included

Leaders of Kentucky's Roman Catholic churches, which have been rocked by sexual-abuse scandals in recent years, have endorsed a state House bill that would toughen penalties for sexual abuse of minors and for those who fail to report it.

Kentucky's four Roman Catholic bishops said the bill "will effectively protect young people from sexual predators and ... will encourage public and private institutions to be vigilant in protecting children entrusted to their care."

House Bill 211 would make it a felony for someone in a position of trust -- such as a minister, teacher or coach -- to have sexual contact with anyone under 18. It also would raise to the felony level certain types of sexual abuse of younger teens now classified as misdemeanors.

The bill, filed by Rep. Jim Wayne, D-Louisville, also would increase penalties for those who fail to report suspected abuse or neglect of children.

The bishops' statement says the bill "appropriately increases the penalty for acts by a person in a position of authority or position of special trust as a way to hold those persons accountable."

The statement, issued by the Catholic Conference of Kentucky, made no reference to the sexual-abuse scandal in the Catholic Church. The Archdiocese of Louisville and the Diocese of Covington were among the hardest hit by the scandal in the nation.

Several priests and former Catholic school teachers were convicted, and more than \$100 million was paid to about 500 plaintiffs in settlements. It was revealed that bishops kept some known abusers in the ministry without alerting authorities or parishioners.

Wayne has said the bill was prompted in part by those cases, as well as scandals of abuse by clergy in other religious denominations, as well as abuse by teachers.

Of the bishops' support, Wayne said: "It shows their commitment to protecting children." "We have a new archbishop (Joseph E. Kurtz) who seems like a deeply spiritual man who's leading the Catholic Conference," Wayne said. "I think he knows the pain and emotional scars that result from children being abused."