

Diocese found 'in full compliance' with national safe environment guidelines

Written by By Suzanne Hammons Voice of the Southwest
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An extensive audit conducted in December 2016 has found the Diocese of Gallup to be in full compliance with national guidelines for preventing abuse and maintaining a safe environment.

When the extent of sexual abuse cases and allegations came to public attention in 2002, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) met in an unprecedented conference in Dallas TX. The result was the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, a set of procedures and guidelines for spotting and preventing abuse in all dioceses in the United States.

To ensure that the requirements – or “norms” – of the Charter are followed, the USCCB partnered with outside investigation firms. Every three years, dioceses in the United States undergo an on-site audit, conducted since 2010 by Stonebridge Business Partners. The New York-based firm specializes in investigating whether business and religious organizations are following in-house compliance arrangements.

For Jim Morasco, a partner in the firm, it's a process that is undertaken very seriously. His auditing teams require access to records and undertake interviews with diocesan officials and employees.

“We go through each article, we request certain documentation, we perform interviews, we look at the documentation that's been prepared, and the processes and procedures and so forth,” Morasco said in a phone interview. “We look at that and we measure that against the minimum

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requirements set forth in the Charter.”

These requirements include an obligation to report allegations of abuse to authorities and cooperate with any investigations, as well as public posting of information on how to contacting a Diocesan Victims Assistance Coordinator.

But even if the minimum requirements are followed, the firm will continue to monitor diocesan activities in the intervening years between audits.

“Someone could be found in compliance, but that doesn’t just mean it’s a letter that says ‘You’re In Compliance’. We’ll go through and if there’s any area for improvement, we’ll make sure that information is communicated to the Bishop,” Morasco explained. “If it’s serious enough, we’re following up to make sure they’ve remediated any issues that we believe are serious, whether or not they’ve been found compliant.”

Dioceses that are found to be non-compliant will be given recommendations on how to meet the requirements of the Charter. Each year the USCCB releases the national findings of the audit, including the list of non-compliant dioceses, in an annual report to the public.

There are some limitations, as Stonebridge notes in the report. If there are incorrect records in a diocese, the firm must take more time to comb through the data and issue corrections. And if certain records are kept on a parish-by-parish basis, rather than a single diocesan database, Stonebridge may not have a complete picture of Safe Environment practices on a parish level.

But despite the extensive and painstaking nature of the process, Morasco has found both the USCCB and dioceses who undertake the audits to be fully cooperative and open to recommendations.

“If there were any limitations on what we’re doing we’d certainly note that, and over the last few years we’ve been doing this, we’ve found not to have those roadblocks or impediments to the work we’re doing.”

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He also noted the commitment to the process he has seen from most bishops and dioceses.

"I think it's a testament to the transparency of the USCCB that they do allow an outside auditor to come in and report on the individual diocese or parish level of compliance with the Charter," he said. "The Church is really spending a tremendous amount of time and money in this area in terms of prevention, training, and of course, trying to heal victims and survivors...you work with any other non-profit organization and they are not doing anywhere near – or even any other church – they are not doing anywhere near what the Catholic Church is doing in this area, and I think having a firm like ours helps that process, that they are committed to spending that kind of money to ensure that bishops are keeping the promise that they made."

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