

# National Review Board issues 5-year report on Church handling of clergy sex abuse

**Washington** - The National Review Board (NRB), a lay body appointed by the president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) to review the Church's handling of the sexual abuse of minors by clerics, cited accomplishments and challenges in a five-year report made public last December.

Judge Michael R. Merz, NRB chair, commended church efforts to date, but said the problem is complex.

"Church efforts for prevention, healing, and vigilance will be demanded for the rest of our days," Judge Merz said. "The price of this crime is steep both in the pain felt by victims and the shadow cast on the reputation of innocent Catholic priests. Most priests never have abused a child or even someone's trust in them, but they bear shame by association. It's not right, but that's the fact."

"Bishops have taken a strong approach to dealing with this crisis," Judge Merz said. "Sexual abuse of children is not a problem in the church alone, but bishops as moral leaders must stand in the forefront of protecting children."

The report is addressed to the U.S. Catholic faithful and is "a record of accomplishments, unfinished work, and challenges that lie ahead," it said. The report praised the USCCB audit process by which "dioceses and eparchies have been audited to assure the implementation and maintenance of the standards established" in the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, which the bishops created in 2002.

"Those audits provide substantial evidence of the bishops' efforts to protect children and respond to the abuses of the past and present. As of 2006, 98 percent of the dioceses and eparchies are participating in the audits. Those audited are in full compliance with the standards set for the audits, the report said. (Note: The Diocese of New Ulm was audited annually since 2003.)

The report also noted that "over six million children have participated in educational programs and over 1.6 million background investigations have taken place" as part of diocesan safe environment programs. However, the NRB urged an expansion of the audits to measure "the quality of the work that the dioceses and parishes are doing."

The Board is encouraging the USCCB to do random audits of the parishes and to work toward establishing best practices in educational programs, victim care, background checks, and investigation of allegations.

The report also cited challenges which the Board said "are not easily resolved since they involve extremely complex issues." Issues are: the need for a greater understanding of victimization and

its consequences; discussions with victims to provide evidence of serious needs that still must be addressed in order for the victims and their families to find the healing that they need; issues relating to the relationship of the Church to its priests, the vast majority of whom are not involved in the scandal, but many of whom feel alienated from both the bishops and the laity; and the particular need to provide appropriate protection and restoration for those accused but later found innocent. The board also called for "greater speed in the process of determining credibility of allegations and consequent responses, as well as determination of an appropriate role for the Church in the supervision of offenders.

It also noted that parishes "also become victims of sexual abuse. Members of parishes experience both a sense of betrayal or outrage over accusations that lead to the removal of a pastor or associate. Often parishioners do not know how to respond to victims and their families and agonize over the lengthy process of determining appropriate responses. This is an area that needs much more attention."

The NRB also cited the need to keep church members better informed on the positive responses the Bishops have made and more active observers of the programs and processes in their parishes and dioceses.

"Such communication is vitally important since the work of the National Review Board is strengthened by vigilant parents and parishioners who investigate the presence and quality of the programs in their parishes and dioceses," the report said. "The obligation to provide safe environments that prevent damage to children, young people, families, parishes, dioceses, and the Church rests with all Catholics."

The full report can be found on the Web at [www.usccb.org/nrbreport2007](http://www.usccb.org/nrbreport2007).

If you or someone you know has been sexually exploited by a member of the clergy and you need to talk with someone about abuse, exploitation, or harassment, please contact the Diocese of New Ulm Victim Assistance Coordinator or the Bishop's Delegate in Matters Pertaining to Sexual Misconduct by Clergy, 1400 6th Street North, New Ulm, MN 56073; phone: (507) 359-2966.

Si usted, o alguien a quien conoce, ha sido explotado sexualmente por un clero y necesita hablar con alguien sobre abuso, explotación o acoso sexual, por favor ponerse en contacto con el Coordinador de Asistencia para Víctimas de la Diócesis de New Ulm o con el Delegado del Obispo en Asuntos que Pertenecen al Abuso Sexual por Cleros de la Diócesis de New Ulm, 1400 6th Street North, New Ulm, MN 56073; número de teléfono (507) 359-2966.