

US Bishops Resign Amid Child Abuse Investigation

Pope Francis on Monday accepted the resignation of two U.S. bishops on Monday, 10 days after a Minnesota prosecutor filed criminal charges against their diocese for failing to protect children from a sexually abusive priest.

Archbishop John Nienstedt of Saint Paul and Minneapolis and one of his deputies, auxiliary Bishop Lee Piche, resigned over their links to Curtis Wehmeyer.

Wehmeyer, who has been dismissed from the priesthood, is serving a five-year prison sentence after pleading guilty in 2012 to criminal sexual conduct with two minors and possessing child pornography.

The pontiff accepted the resignations the week after approving an unprecedented Vatican tribunal intended to judge bishops for covering up or failing to report sexual abuse, which has caused worldwide scandal for more than a decade.

Minnesota prosecutor John Choi brought the charges against the archdiocese on June 5. Hundreds of civil cases have already been filed against it for allegedly failing to supervise priests or ignoring sexual abuse by the clergy.

Anne Barrett Doyle of , an independent group that helps tackle the issue in the Catholic Church, said the resignations were “disgracefully overdue.”

“Today’s news from Minnesota is a sobering reminder that the real source of accountability in the Catholic abuse crisis continues to reside outside the church,” Doyle said.

“Nienstedt and Piche would still be in power if not for (Choi’s) recent indictment of the archdiocese.”

Nienstedt said he was leaving because his leadership had “drawn attention away from the good works (of the Church).”

“I leave with a clear conscience knowing that my team and I have put in place solid protocols to ensure the protection of minors and vulnerable adults,” he said in a statement.

Piche said people of the archdiocese needed healing and hope. “I was getting in the way of that and so I had to resign,” he said in a statement.

The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP), called for a detailed investigation of the alleged cover-up.

“There were dozens of Church staff who could and should have stopped many of these abusers’ crimes by simply calling 911. But they protected themselves and their jobs by staying silent. They too should be ousted by the Vatican,” SNAP said.

Choi described “a disturbing institutional and systemic pattern of behavior” stretching back decades at the highest level of leadership in the archdiocese, which has 187 parishes and 90 schools.

On Monday, Choi said in a statement that while the resignations were an affirmative step, the criminal investigation continues.

“As we have said, the goals of our actions are to hold the archdiocese accountable, seek justice for the victims and our community, and to take appropriate steps to ensure that what we have alleged and intend to prove about the past conduct of church officials will never be repeated,” Choi said.

Victims told investigators that Wehmeyer gave them beer and marijuana or cigarettes, showed them pornographic images and touched their genitals in a camper parked on parish grounds or while camping, according to the complaint.

He is also awaiting trial on charges of assaulting a third

child.

The archdiocese was charged with three misdemeanor counts of contributing to the need for protection or services for the minors who were the victims of sexual abuse and three misdemeanor counts of contributing to the minors' delinquency or status as juvenile petty offenders. The archdiocese also faces a related civil complaint.

Pope Francis has appointed Bishop Bernard Anthony Hebda of Newark as apostolic administrator to run the archdiocese until a new archbishop is appointed.

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