

Catholic bishops resist reforms on clergy abusers, says academic study

by [Daniel Burke](#) in the [June 14, 2011](#) issue

A sweeping new report on the Catholic Church's clergy sexual abuse scandal compares the church to police departments, with similar hierarchies, moral authority and isolated work environments.

And because the church, like the police, has "historically 'policed itself,'" as the report says, some lay Catholics and victims' advocates say even a stack of damning reports will not change a church historically resistant to reform.

A recent grand jury report that found dozens of accused priests still in active ministry in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, critics say, gives them little evidence for hope.

The study by New York's John Jay College of Criminal Justice, released May 18, portrays the abuse scandal as largely confined to the past. More than 90 percent of nearly 10,700 allegations against Catholic priests occurred before 1990, according to the report.

Researchers said the abuse of minors correlated to a jump in deviant behavior during the 1960s and '70s, such as premarital sex, experimental drug use and crime. However, that theorized correlation was widely questioned or criticized by those commenting on the report.

More important, the ongoing crisis in Philadelphia—which church bishops have been at a loss to explain—shows that the scandal will continue unless bishops are held accountable for their actions, according to victims' advocates.

The Philadelphia grand jury report alleged that church officials kept 37 priests in active ministry, despite credible accusations of sexual abuse. The archdiocese later suspended 26 priests and has mounted an internal investigation.

In a May 12 essay in *Commonweal* magazine, Ana Maria Catanzaro, who heads the Archdiocese of Philadelphia's sexual abuse review board, accused Cardinal Justin Rigali and his subordinates of failing "miserably at being open and transparent." Catanzaro said no bishops have called for leaders in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia to be held accountable by church or civil authorities.

After the John Jay report was released, Bishop Blase Cupich of Spokane, Washington, who chairs the bishops' child protection committee, said, "We just won't know what happened in Philadelphia" until the archdiocese completes its investigation.

New nonmandatory guidelines issued May 16 by the Vatican also give little indication that such oversight is forthcoming. Only one U.S. bishop, Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston, was forced to resign—a decade ago.

Over the 60 years covered by the study, bishops' response to abusive priests "changed substantively," according to the John Jay report. "For example, abusive priests were less likely to be returned to active ministry and/or more likely to be placed on administrative leave during the later years," the report states.

The report said bishops, like many Americans during the 1950s to 1980s, failed to understand the harm resulting from sexual abuse. Researchers, however, did not give the bishops a pass.

"Although this lack of understanding was consistent with the overall lack of understanding of victimization at the time, the absence of acknowledgment of harm was a significant ethical lapse on the part of leadership in some dioceses," the report states.

Under get-tough reforms adopted by the bishops in 2002, credible accusations of abuse are supposed to be reported to civil authorities, and dioceses are to be audited annually. But neither policy is mandatory.

The John Jay report found that bishops reported just 14 percent of accusations against priests to the police. And two bishops refuse to allow the audits in their dioceses.

In January, Pope Benedict XVI promoted one of the two holdout bishops, Robert Vasa, from Baker, Oregon, to a larger diocese in Santa Rosa, California.

"What kind of message does that send?" said Nicolas Cafardi, a canon law professor and former chairman of the bishops committee that drafted the abuse guidelines.
—RNS