

Abuse watchdogs cite bishops' 'failings'

by [David Gibson](#) in the [June 12, 2013](#) issue

Even as an annual review in mid-May gave Catholic bishops high marks on sexual abuse prevention policies, officials with the church's oversight agencies expressed serious concerns about "recent high-profile failings."

The latest scandal has shaken Newark, New Jersey, where Archbishop John Myers failed to stop a priest from ministering to children in several parishes even though the archbishop had assured prosecutors that he would enforce a lifetime ban on the priest's access to children following a molestation case.

Myers initially defended his oversight of Michael Fugee, but under increasing pressure he reversed himself. Fugee then resigned from ministry, but there are ongoing calls for Myers to step down.

"I'll be honest with you, Newark is disheartening," said Bernie Nojadera, head of the Office of Child and Youth Protection at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. "It is like taking steps backward."

Nojadera, along with Al J. Notzon III, head of a blue-ribbon review board of lay leaders that checks the bishops' compliance with their policies, on May 9 released an annual audit that found that in 2012 the number of allegations, victims and offenders was declining.

In addition, the review found that almost all of the nearly 200 Catholic dioceses in the U.S. were in compliance with the policies set out in the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, which the bishops adopted in 2002 at the height of the clergy sexual abuse scandal.

At the same time, in letters to Cardinal Timothy Dolan, president of the USCCB, both Notzon and Nojadera noted that "disturbing news in the media" and "recent high-profile failings" have undermined the bishops' efforts.

In separate interviews, both Nojadera and Notzon said they were referring to:

- the trial and conviction of Monsignor William Lynn in Philadelphia last summer for shielding abusive priests;
- the conviction of Bishop Robert Finn in Kansas City, Missouri, last September for failing to report a suspected abuser to police;
- the release earlier this year of records from the Archdiocese of Los Angeles that showed the extent to which retired Cardinal Roger Mahony and a top aide covered up for abusers in the priesthood.

Nojadera also pointed to the news in February that Fugee had been appointed to a high-profile administrative job in the Newark archdiocese, and that was before the latest bombshell over Fugee's unauthorized work with children.

Notzon said the recent lapses underscore how important it is for the bishops to be vigilant—and accountable—because even one failure to uphold the charter can undermine the credibility that the review board has worked for a decade to restore.

In meetings over the past year, he said, he's been pushing the bishops to find a way to call out a fellow churchman who violates the charter.

The review board itself has no authority to discipline bishops—only the pope can do that—and the bishops have adopted only a vague policy of “fraternal correction.” The provision has no enforcement mechanism and in any case the bishops rarely if ever rebuke their colleagues, even in private. —RNS