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U.S.

2 Bishops Resign in Minnesota Over Sexual Abuse Scandal

By **MITCH SMITH** and **LAURIE GOODSTEIN** JUNE 15, 2015

CHICAGO — Two bishops in the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis resigned their posts Monday, the second time this spring that American church leaders have stepped aside after complaints over their handling of sexual abuse claims involving priests.

In Minnesota, Archbishop John C. Nienstedt and an auxiliary bishop, Lee A. Piché, announced their departures less than two weeks after prosecutors in St. Paul accused the archdiocese of willfully ignoring warning signs of a pedophile priest. Their resignations followed the April exit of Bishop Robert W. Finn from the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph in Missouri, who had been convicted of a misdemeanor for failing to report a priest who took pornographic pictures of girls.

Archbishop Nienstedt said in a statement Monday that his “leadership has unfortunately drawn attention away from the good works of His Church and those who perform them.”

Though sexual misconduct by individual priests has long drawn headlines in Minnesota and around the world, the latest resignations come amid a push to punish the church leaders who did not intervene.

Under Pope Francis, the Vatican has stepped up efforts to hold bishops accountable for covering up or failing to take action in sexual abuse cases, including the announcement last week of a tribunal to weigh such cases.

The Rev. Federico Lombardi, a Vatican spokesman, did not say Monday whether the two Minnesota bishops had been or would be judged by the tribunal. "It is a valid question," Father Lombardi said. "I have no information for now."

Asked if the formation of the tribunal might have been a factor in the resignations, Father Lombardi said, "I don't know if you can make that specific of a connection."

But there is a determination within the church, he said, "to face several different situations."

Archbishop Nienstedt also attended the bishop's conference last week in St. Louis as did the papal nuncio to the United States, Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, whose portfolio includes helping to handle personnel problems in the American hierarchy.

John J. Choi, the prosecutor in Ramsey County, Minn., said the resignations would not affect his office's criminal and civil cases against the archdiocese, which accused church leaders of failing to intervene against a priest despite repeated complaints of misconduct. That priest, Curtis Wehmeyer, has since been defrocked and imprisoned on sexual abuse charges involving boys in his parish.

"While today's resignation will be viewed as a positive development by many in our community, the pending criminal action and civil petition and the ongoing investigation will continue," Mr. Choi said in a statement. "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."

In accepting the resignations, the pope appointed the Rev. Bernard A. Hebda, a coadjutor archbishop of Newark, as apostolic administrator to oversee the Minnesota archdiocese. The Vatican also announced on Monday that it would open a trial in July of its former ambassador to the Dominican Republic, Jozef Wesolowski, on charges of sexually abusing boys while he served in the Caribbean and of possessing child pornography.

The Minnesota and Missouri church leaders are hardly the first bishops to resign under scrutiny or accusations that they failed abuse victims. Since the papacy of John Paul II — now St. John Paul — began in 1978, 16 other bishops have resigned or been forced from office under a cloud of accusations that they mishandled abuse cases, according to research by BishopAccountability.org, an advocacy group in Waltham, Mass. Archbishop Nienstedt is the 17th, by that group's count.

Archbishop Nienstedt had become one of the most embattled figures in the American Catholic hierarchy, under fire in the courts, in the pews and on newspaper editorial pages. He had refused to resign about a year ago after coming under sharp criticism from his own former chancellor for canonical affairs, Jennifer M. Haselberger, who charged that the church used a chaotic system of record keeping that helped conceal the backgrounds of guilty priests who remained on assignment.

He did, however, apologize at the time for his conduct, saying that while he had never knowingly covered up sexual abuse by clergy members, he had become “too trusting of our internal process and not as hands-on as I could have been in matters of priest misconduct.”

On Monday, he said he would “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.”

Archbishop Nienstedt was himself the subject of two recent investigations into possible misconduct, though no findings of wrongdoing have been announced.

In one case, a boy told the police that the archbishop touched his buttocks while posing for a photograph after his confirmation ceremony. The archbishop denied wrongdoing and temporarily stepped aside while the authorities investigated. No charges were filed after an investigation, and Archbishop Nienstedt returned to work.

In another case, the archdiocese announced that it had received “claims regarding alleged misbehavior” against Archbishop Nienstedt that did not involve minors. The claims were said to be about a series of sexual

relationships with men, including seminarians and priests. The church announced an investigation into that matter last year. The archdiocese's communications director, Tom Halden, would not answer questions Monday about the status of that inquiry.

The Rev. Andrew Cozzens, an auxiliary bishop for the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis who will remain in his post, spoke briefly to reporters Monday about the resignations. He read only from a statement, which noted that there "will be many unanswered questions as we take this significant transitional step."

"This has been a painful process," said Bishop Cozzens, who asked for prayers for sexual abuse survivors and for the archdiocese. "A change in leadership offers us an opportunity for greater healing and the ability to move forward."

Critics of the archdiocese said the resignations, while not surprising, were only another step in addressing the deep-seated concerns with the archdiocese and its leaders.

Jeff Anderson, a lawyer in Minnesota who has represented victims of sexual abuse by clergy, said more top officials needed to be held accountable for their actions, and that criminal charges would be appropriate for some of them.

Mr. Anderson attributed Monday's developments to the criminal charges against the archdiocese and unflattering disclosures made in recent civil cases. Many of those lawsuits were made possible by legislation that allowed victims to sue the church over abuse that happened years ago, and for which the statute of limitations had expired.

"This is about a culture and system that has been intractable," Mr. Anderson said. "It needs to continue on a headlong course toward full accountability and full disclosure."

Mitch Smith reported from Chicago, and Laurie Goodstein from New York. Gaia Pianigiani contributed reporting from Rome.

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