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STATEMENT REGARDING REVIEW BOARD FOR BISHOPS

From Auxiliary Bishop Andrew H. Cozzens

Right now, the Catholic Church desperately needs an independent structure, led by experienced lay personnel, to investigate and review allegations made against bishops, archbishops and cardinals – and not just priests, as is the case in many dioceses throughout the United States. As a practical matter, bishop-led investigations have mixed credibility in the public domain: some inevitably believe the accused bishop is being treated unfairly; others believe he is receiving preferential treatment. A fair resolution becomes unachievable. The accuser deserves better. We all deserve better.

I am acutely aware of this, because I was personally involved, along with Bishop Lee Piché, in guiding the investigation of Archbishop John Nienstedt in 2014. In retrospect, it was doomed to fail. We did not have enough objectivity or experience with such investigations. Nor did we have authority to act. Throughout our efforts, we did not know where we could turn for assistance, because there was no meaningful structure to address allegations against bishops.

In the case of Archbishop Nienstedt, in early 2014, Archbishop Nienstedt asked his subordinates to conduct a review of allegations against him. When affidavits containing serious allegations of misconduct by Archbishop Nienstedt with adults were brought forward, Bishop Piché and I tried our best to bring them to the attention of people who might have authority to act and guide the investigation. This included the then nuncio Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganó. When Bishop Piché and I believed that we were being told by the nuncio to close the investigation, we strenuously objected. When the nuncio clarified that we should focus the investigation and complete it, we did so. Although there were internal disagreements about how to complete it, Bishop Piché thought it best to hire a second firm to complete the review, because Archbishop Nienstedt contended the first firm had been unfair to him. Father Daniel Griffith strongly disagreed with that decision. During this long period, on more than one occasion, I counseled Archbishop Nienstedt to resign for the good of the Archdiocese.

Throughout this process, there was confusion about who was ultimately in charge and what should be done to ensure a fair outcome. I think that Bishop Piché believes that the investigation was completed to the best of his ability. I understand the strong frustrations expressed by Father Griffith, whom I believe acted in good faith and with sincerity and integrity. We all did the best we could in a difficult situation.

In contrast, today we are better prepared. When there is an allegation against a bishop or archbishop in our Archdiocese, it is reported to the Board of Directors, lay people. They play a vital role in making certain that all allegations are investigated and addressed. I believe that a similar approach utilizing lay expertise is necessary on the national level. An independent national review board would result in a more fair process for holding the hierarchy accountable. In this way, there will be more confidence in our Church leaders in the future.