Opinion
Editorial

Tennessee Bishops J. Mark Spalding of Nashville, Richard Stika of Knoxville and David Talley of Memphis are seen at St. Mary of the Seven Sorrows Church March 23, 2022, in downtown Nashville. An apostolic visitation is investigating concerns about Stika's leadership. (CNS/Tennessee Register/Katie Peterson)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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There are relatively few positions in the country that have the job security of a Catholic bishop. In his diocese, as the church's Code of Canon Law puts it, the bishop has "all ordinary, proper, and immediate power." No one there can contravene his orders or force his removal from office. Neither can the national conference of bishops, nor can any regional ecclesial entities.

Even Elon Musk, the new lord of Twitter and aspiring president of Mars, ultimately reports to various boards of directors. Catholic bishops report to the pope directly, and only he can choose to remove them.

Given that organizational reality, one can understand the dilemma of a Catholic in the Diocese of Knoxville, Tennessee. As NCR staff reporter Brian Fraga highlights in a thorough and wide-ranging investigation, many parishioners there are feeling demoralized and unsure what power they have to effect change in their diocese. They certainly deserve some answers.

Bishop Richard Stika, already a polarizing figure for his brash style of leadership, now stands accused in two lawsuits of allegedly obstructing investigations into clergy sexual abuse, and intimidating people who reported being abused. Stika denies the allegations.

In 2021, several priests in Knoxville formally filed a complaint to the Vatican about Stika's alleged misconduct, availing themselves of the new process Pope Francis created in 2019 to report suspicions of abuse or cover-up by bishops. (That process is outlined in the apostolic letter *Vos Estis Lux Mundi*, which the pope concretized as permanent church law this March).

One of the priests who filed the complaint told NCR he has been "deeply discouraged" by the process since they made their report. An apostolic visitation, or formal investigation into Stika, was not conducted until a year later, in late November and early December 2022. As of May 2023, there has been no update on what the investigators, Bishops Michael Burbidge of Arlington, Virginia, and Barry Knestout of Richmond, Virginia, have found.

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It is certainly understandable that an investigation like this would take time. And there is an obvious tension between wanting to provide local Catholics with transparency about the process and the need for some personnel matters to be kept private.

But a two-year time frame for any public communication about the matter seems excessive. *Vos Estis* itself outlines that, once authorized by the pope, an investigation into a bishop should be finalized within 90 days.

Kristy Higgins, a Chattanooga resident, explained local Catholics' desire for some sort of update. "We want to at least be assured that our concerns have been heard," she said. "Even if the answer is that there's nothing to these allegations, that we've investigated and we've determined there's nothing to it. Then great. But give us that, at least. Show us that someone cares about us."

Given the horrendous, systemic failures of the church with regard to sexual abuse, it is beyond important that the Vatican get this process for investigating new claims of abuse or cover-up right.

This is not even to mention the fact that there are other U.S. Catholic bishops who may also urgently deserve to be investigated. Perhaps past ideas about a bishop's job security should be those exactly: past ideas.

Read this next: Lingering Vatican investigation of Tennessee bishop leaves diocese demoralized

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