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Catholic Bishops Uphold 2002 Sex Abuse Policy

By [LAURIE GOODSTEIN](#)

The nation's Roman Catholic bishops voted overwhelmingly on Thursday to retain their policies on sexual abuse by clergy members with only minor revisions, disregarding victims' advocates who had called for a more substantial overhaul.

The bishops promised to reconsider the policies again two years from now, after they receive recommendations from their national sexual advisory board, which is composed primarily of lay people with expertise in the field.

The bishops first adopted the policies under intense public scrutiny in 2002, as the scandal over abuse by priests reached a fever pitch. The policy's cornerstone, which stirred great debate among the bishops at the time, was a commitment to remove from ministry every priest credibly accused of abuse even once, a tenet referred to as "zero tolerance."

That commitment has been called into question in recent months with revelations that accused priests were allowed to continue in ministry in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia and the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph. Those bishops did not forward details about all the cases to their sexual abuse advisory boards or the police.

In recent weeks, church critics have called for the bishops to close the loopholes they see in the policy, known as "The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People." One such group, [BishopAccountability.org](#), called for strengthening the review boards and the provisions that require reporting to civil authorities.

But the bishops' leaders went into their meeting in Bellevue, Wash., near Seattle, on Wednesday saying that they would stand by the current charter because it is effective. The charter was approved on a vote of 187 to 5, with 4 abstentions.

The few changes included adding [child pornography](#) and abuse of the mentally ill to the violations covered by the charter, bringing it into conformity with guidelines the [Vatican](#) issued last year. They also inserted a passage saying that bishops who are accused of sexual abuse, or are aware of an accusation against a fellow bishop, are "obliged" to report this to the papal representative in Washington, D.C.

At the meeting this year, only one prelate, Francis Hurley, the retired archbishop of Anchorage, rose to speak in favor of removing the “zero tolerance” provision. Saying that it has caused anger among priests and contradicted the church’s teachings on reconciliation and forgiveness, he proposed allowing some priests who had abused to return to limited ministry.

But he found no support for such an amendment. At a news conference after the morning session, Bishop Blase Cupich, chairman of the bishops’ child protection committee, said: “I would find it very difficult as a bishop to go to a community and say, ‘I’m going to assign as your pastor or associate pastor a priest who has abused a minor.’ I can tell you, that priest would not be accepted, and my judgment on other issues would be called into question.”

On other matters, the bishops also adopted a strongly worded statement against physician-assisted suicide, and heard updates about their multimedia campaign against [same-sex marriage](#).

During discussion in the open conference session, Archbishop Edwin O’Brien of Baltimore expressed concern about polls showing a shift in public attitudes in the last few years toward approval of same-sex marriage.

“It seems like almost overnight we’ve lost the young adult community on this, including Catholics,” said Archbishop O’Brien, adding that young people had been misled to believe that gay marriage is a civil rights issue.

Bishop Salvatore Cordileone of Oakland, chairman of the bishops’ committee on the defense of marriage, responded, “My reflection on this is to ask, whose rights do we really need to respect?”

“Children are the most vulnerable in society,” he concluded, “and children need a mother and a father.”