



For immediate release • July 1, 2025

NATIONAL PRIESTS' GROUP SEEKS 'DUE PROCESS' SUPPORT FROM POPE LEO XIV

In a letter to Pope Leo XIV, the Association of US Catholic Priests urges the Holy Father to address and correct the injustices of some bishops and religious superiors who have denied due process to priests in their charge who are accused of wrong-doing. Letters regarding the matter are also being sent to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and to individual bishops in national leadership.

The letter was signed by Father Neil Pezullo, GHM, chair of the AUSCP Leadership Team, and Father Stephen P. Newton, CSC, executive director.

The AUSCP letter to the pope, offering prayers and support for his leadership, was circulated among the members and friends of the association, June 24, during the AUSCP Annual Assembly, held in San Antonio, Texas. The letter detailed the critical issue concerning the lack of due process extended to accused priests by bishops and the superiors of religious orders and secular institutes, drawn from a study done by the AUSCP Mutual Support Working Group.

The detailed study was entitled, "Moving Toward Restoring Justice for Priests." Over the past two years the study found what the priests' group considers multiple infractions of Canon Law committed by bishops and superiors that have gravely harmed the reputation of priests, caused deep emotional and psychological harm, and eroded the faithful's trust in the Church's commitment to justice. (The study is available at <https://auscp.org/moving-toward-restoring-justice-for-priests>)

The infractions cited include:

- The imposition of premature penalties before priests have had the opportunity to defend themselves.
- Publishing the names of priests as accused before substantial and verifiable evidence has been gathered and the investigation completed, including the naming of deceased priests who are unable to defend themselves.
- Continued freezing of priests from their ministry even when no credible evidence is found.

"Without a fair process," the study claims, "accusations may not be properly investigated and accusers may be deprived of the justice they deserve. It is crucial that the Church address these injustices by ensuring that all accusers and accused priests are granted a fair hearing. Should the case be judged as noncredible or unsubstantiated, accused priests must be afforded the opportunity to clear their names."

The study defines due process as a fundamental legal principle, ensuring that laws are applied fairly and consistently to all individuals. It does not concern itself with determining guilt or innocence, but rather with ensuring that every individual is treated equitably throughout legal proceedings.

The working group noted that there have been numerous instances in which due process has been undermined within the Church – including at the beginning of the sexual abuse scandal, when faithful and caring parents sought due process from the bishops for their claims, but were often dismissed or ignored. Their rights to due process were not fully honored.

According to the study, this is also evident when accusations are made against priests. In many cases, bishops and religious superiors, perhaps to avoid scandal, have acted precipitously, accepting accusations at face value without a full investigation. This knee-jerk response has resulted in many priests being wrongly penalized or removed from ministry based on unfounded accusations, often due to delays or other procedural failures. Such actions, ignore the fundamental principle of presumption of innocence. Canon Law clearly states that no individual can be punished without a thorough investigation and a fair process. Without due process, priests may be wrongly stripped of their duties, and their reputations irreparably harmed.

The AUSCP called on the Holy Father to prevail upon Church leaders to simply follow the law. Specifically, adherence to Canons 1321, 1341, and 1362 is essential to preserving the integrity of the investigative process and restoring trust among the clergy that they are supported and valued by their bishops and the church. This embracement of due process, presumption of innocence, and the right to a good reputation is foundational to the achievement of justice. Equally true is an investigation completed swiftly and competently, thus appreciating the legal maxim, justice delayed is justice denied. This is true for both the accuser and the accused.

In expressing their trust in the Holy Father's leadership to guide the people of God towards Christ, the AUSCP will continue to respond in a spirit of mutual support and a collegial voice for priests. The AUSCP also respectfully approached the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops with a spirit open to a continuing conversation of enhancing protections against sexual abuse, while ensuring that every victim and named priest cleric receive the due process they are entitled.

Priests seeking assistance or further information about their canonical and civil rights, particularly in the context of allegations of misconduct, are invited to contact the AUSCP for further information. The Association of U.S. Catholic Priests was founded in 2011 to be the pastoral and collegial voice of our member priests, all in good standing in dioceses and religious communities.

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DOCUMENT Moving Toward Restoring Justice for Priests:
<https://auscp.org/moving-toward-restoring-justice-for-priests/>

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