

New York, Baltimore archdioceses list priests 'credibly accused' of sex abuse. But what counts as credible?

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April 26

The Catholic Archdiocese of Baltimore this week made a major revision to its list of priests deemed credibly accused of abusing minors — upping the number by 22 percent, to 126, by adding for the first time some who were accused after their deaths. The Archdiocese of New York on Friday released a list of 120 priests and deacons — without including details of the men's work histories.

The new lists highlight the wide range of standards that dioceses are using to compile the lists and have raised new questions about the U.S. church's response to the clergy abuse crisis.

The church has been promoting the release of accused priest lists — which have grown from 35 in 2018 to more than 120 as of this month, according to [BishopAccountability.org](#) — as evidence of a cultural move toward transparency. But even as they represent a significant shift from the aftermath of the 2002 crisis, they are coming under fire from some survivors and advocates for their inconsistent criteria, which in many cases lead to lists that omit names for unclear reasons or fall short on information about priests that are named.

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Advocates point to cases such as that of George Stallings, a former priest who wasn't on the list Washington's archdiocese put out in the fall, despite it paying \$125,000 in 2009 to a man who said Stallings and a

4/20/2018 New York, Baltimore archdioceses list priests credibly accused of sex abuse. But what counts as credible? The Washington Post seminarian sexually abused him as a teen. Or that of the Rev. Terry Specht, the longtime director of Child Protection and Safety in Arlington, Va., whose name wasn't on Arlington's February list, despite that officials permanently removed his right to act as a priest after he was accused of teen abuse.

Many dioceses don't include on their lists priests who are believed to have abused in their jurisdictions but are technically affiliated with religious orders (such as the Jesuits or Franciscans) or with another diocese. Some dioceses exclude people who are dead or who have only one accuser. Lists often include sparse information about priests' work history or details of the allegations or evidence.

"All of the forces that were at work in keeping this under wraps, those forces haven't gone away; it's just that there are now countervailing forces," such as the media, said Terry McKiernan, president of Bishop Accountability, a leading site that tracks abuse in the U.S. church. "By really reducing the news to a list of names whose stories we really don't know, they take a really negative story and turn it into a positive one."

The lists now being released by many of the country's 178 dioceses were mandated by courts or by settlements with victims, or were initiated by a "new generation of bishops who understand the importance of putting victims first," said Kathleen McChesney, a former FBI agent who in 2002 established and then led the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' child protection office and now consults dioceses on topics including misconduct.

"Previous generations were so concerned about scandal and protecting the name of the church they'd never consider" putting out such lists, she said. McChesney believes the lists will be improved over time. They "are a good starting point," she said.

Generally, when lists are announced, victims' praise is faint at best and advocates are fast to point out the holes. Some survivors are fed up that it took so many years for their release and that the lists, even now, are skimpy. Many victims have been and remain silent.

To many victims, the lists are a public affirmation that they told the truth and, in many cases, are not alone in being abused by a specific priest. That's why some feel angry when lists are incomplete or hard to access on diocesan websites.

Gamal Awad, a Marine veteran who says he was harmed by Stallings and a seminarian when he was 14, declined to speak to The Washington Post, but his lawyer from the case and settlement, Adam Horowitz, said he was "floored Stallings isn't on the list."

In a 2008 lawsuit, Awad said he was molested in 1984 by a seminarian who was living with Stallings. When Awad went to Stallings's room to report it, the priest was lying on his bed in an undershirt and underpants, talking on the phone, the complaint says. He then "grabbed [Awad's] arm and pulled Plaintiff on top of him. Plaintiff tried to rise up out of the grasp of Father Stallings multiple times but Father Stallings kept pulling Plaintiff on top of him." Eventually, the complaint says, Awad broke free.

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Two men, who were not identified, told The Post in 1989 and 1990 that Stallings sexually abused them when they were altar boys under his supervision.

Ed McFadden, a spokesman for the Archdiocese of Washington, told The Post this spring that the two never approached the archdiocese and that, as a result, officials were not able to determine their identities or investigate their claims. A Post story from 1990 also quoted a top archdiocesan official as saying the then-archbishop received a signed letter from a parishioner accusing Stallings of having a sexual relationship with a boy in her family. McFadden said the archdiocese couldn't locate the letter but shared a 1990 letter the archdiocese wrote to a Post reporter that says the parishioner wouldn't speak further with church officials. The 1990 letter doesn't make clear if the allegation was related to a minor.

In the case of Awad, McFadden says Stallings denied the complaint received in 2008. Stallings wasn't included on the newly released list, McFadden said, because the complaint against him was of "conduct that was not explicitly sexual."

"For a number of reasons — including the nature of the allegation, the fact that it was based on a recovered memory, and the fact that it was denied and uncorroborated — the archdiocese was not prepared to say that it believed George Stallings had engaged in sexual abuse of a minor," McFadden said in a statement.

Efforts to speak with Stallings, who now runs the Imani Temple African-American Catholic Congregation in Prince George's County, were unsuccessful. Phone messages left at the temple and with the Unification Church, with which he has been affiliated, were not returned by him.

In nearby Arlington, diocesan officials declined to speak by telephone but said via email that they didn't include Specht, who led child protection training and efforts from 2004 until 2011, because they were "not able to conclude as to the credibility or non-credibility of the accusation." Specht was accused in 2012 of sexual misconduct involving a teen boy.

When Specht was accused, he was placed on administrative leave and shortly after requested medical retirement. "He now lives in retirement, does not have permission to practice priestly ministry, and will not return to priestly ministry," the diocese said in a statement.

Fairfax County police in 2012 investigated the man's claim that there had been sexual activity between him and Specht. Asked what happened to the probe, Commonwealth's Attorney Ray Morrogh said police were unable to clarify when the alleged activity would have taken place — whether the man was 14, 15 or 16 at the time. If he was 14 or 15, that would have been a felony and the statute of limitations would not have expired. If he was 16, it would have been a misdemeanor and the statute would have expired. "We worked with the victim and weren't able to clarify the date," Morrogh said.

Specht denied to police that any sexual activity occurred, Morrogh's office said. Specht declined to comment to The Post.

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The Post asked the diocese what the difference would be between what its review board found — that merited removing Specht’s right to function as a priest — and what it would take for the board to declare the allegation against him “credible.”

Billy Atwell, chief communications officer for the diocese, in an emailed statement pointed toward the fact that no police charges were filed and that “substantial evidence was not offered to the diocese.”

The Post asked Bishop Michael Burbidge of Arlington how he felt about leaving off Specht’s name. Burbidge declined to be interviewed but in an emailed statement said he had met with abuse victims and heard their stories and was informed by them.

He noted that the diocese [included a footnote](#) in its February list about Specht. “We were transparent in including an accurate explanation of the status of his case in the list that we published,” the statement said. “This was done to avoid any perception that we were not being forthright and to give the faithful confidence in the work that had done and the review that had been conducted.”

The church’s own somewhat liberal definition of an offender is part of the reason it faces complaints. If the bar is relatively low, why not add likely offenders?

The rules — called “Norms” — approved by the U.S. bishops in 2005 and later by the Vatican for dealing with abuse say clerical abuse that “is admitted or established after an appropriate process” must result in the priest’s removal. The phrase “credibly accused” eventually seeped into diocesan policies, interpreted as meaning anything from “Could it have happened?” to “Do you believe it did?” It’s not “guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.” The rules say nothing specific about lists and who can be on them.

“My definition I use is: ‘could have happened in terms of time, location, people involved and plausibility,’ ” said McChesney, the consultant.

“If someone says that a space alien sexually abused them, obviously that’s not credible,” said Thomas Plante, a Santa Clara University professor who serves on review boards for the Diocese of San Jose and the Jesuits’ Western Province. Or if “it happened in the basement, but the church never had a basement.”

Two decades after the Boston abuse crisis linked the issue to the Catholic Church, and amid a year of scandals, many bishops are frustrated with the lack of clarity and uniformity. At their national annual fall meeting in Baltimore in November, bishops spoke from the floor about the need for a standard.

In Arlington, [the diocese defines](#) “credibly accused” in one of three ways: an admission of guilt by the accused priest; a determination of guilt in a criminal court, civil court or by an ecclesiastical process; or the review board finding the allegation credible. The D.C. archdiocese, which includes the city and Maryland suburbs, [defines it as a charge](#) that meets one or more of the following standards: that it is believable and plausible; natural, reasonable and probable; corroborated with other evidence or another source and/or acknowledged or admitted to by the accused.

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The church is in a challenging spot, Plante and McKiernan said, in part because the definition is loose.

“They’re getting pressure from all over to list every name that’s come to their attention for the last 50 or 60 years, but it’s not so simple,” Plante said. “There are false accusations out there, and many of those folks who are accused, they’re dead, so they can’t defend themselves . . . and they still have families that might be alive.”

Those reasons figured into Baltimore’s previous policy of not including the names of accused priests who are deceased. After a Pennsylvania grand jury report on abuse was released in August, Archbishop William Lori appointed a committee of employees of the archdiocese, mainly lay people, who came up with three criteria for adding them: The priest must have been accused by more than one person, accused in a case with corroborating evidence, or accused in the press or another public venue.

While McKiernan praised some aspects of Baltimore’s list, he questioned whether the new criteria still shield some priests. For example, he said, “There are certainly singly accused priests about whom one is really not going to have any doubt.”

On Friday, a list came from New York, one of the country’s most prominent and largest dioceses, and one whose lack of a public list has been glaring, advocates for survivors say.

Abuse survivor and advocate Becky Ianni says it bothers victims that many lists give so little specificity. Her abuser, the late William Reinecke, was named on the Arlington list. He shot himself after being confronted by a man who says Reinecke abused him as a boy, according to [a 1992 Post profile](#) of the man, Joe McDonald. Ianni says it hurts victims when dioceses aren’t transparent about the number of cases. She says she knows of at least three accusers of Reinecke.

Atwell, the diocesan spokesman, declined in an email to say how many people accused Reinecke.

CORRECTION: An earlier version of this story mistakenly ran with a photo of Washington National Cathedral. The cathedral is an Episcopal church.

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Michelle Boorstein is a religion reporter, covering the busy marketplace of American faith. Her career has included a decade of globe-trotting with the Associated Press, covering topics including terrorism in the Arizona desert, debates on male circumcision, Ugandan royalty, and how strapped doctors in Afghanistan decide who lives and who dies. [Follow](#) 

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