

BISHOPS MAKE PROGRESS; MUCH WORK REMAINS

When the bishops assembled in Dallas on June 13, they did so in a climate of apprehensiveness. Two days later, they left in a mood of contentment. While not everyone was happy with the charter that was approved (including many who voted for it), a calmness was finally evident.

The U.S. Bishops' Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Abuse floated a draft of the document the week before the Dallas meeting. It got mixed reviews. We issued a statement saying "The draft is a reasonable document that should allay the worst fears of a skeptical laity. It is thoughtful, pointed and fair to all parties." But there was a loophole: the draft allowed priests to remain in ministry if they had offended only once in their career and had since been rehabilitated.

It was this exception that brought about the greatest criticism (we called for greater clarification). So when the bishops met in Dallas, they were pressured to make some changes. They were also besieged by Catholics who were pushing their own agenda and by a media that got caught up in the frenzy.

On the opening day of the meeting, Bishop Wilton Gregory, president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, delivered what the Catholic League dubbed a "home run" speech. It amounted to "a collective act of contrition on the part of the bishops." Perhaps most important, we said, "It set the tone for the entire meeting."

When the final vote was tallied, much had been accomplished. The bishops made it clear that there was no room in active ministry for any priest who had abused a minor. They added that from this day forward any allegations of wrongdoing would

be passed on to the civil authorities. Also approved was greater lay participation at the diocesan level and a national oversight board, headed by Oklahoma Governor Frank Keating, to monitor the work of the bishops.

Some wondered if the document had taken the due process rights of accused priests too lightly. Others complained that the bishops said virtually nothing about their own role in enabling molesting priests to move from parish to parish. Still others criticized the statement for its refusal to address such issues as homosexuality, dissent, celibacy and women's ordination.

Everyone agrees there is much work to be done. The relationship between theological dissidence and behavioral deviance is one the league would like to see examined.