

Diocese in Full Compliance with Charter Audit

By Bishop Victor Galeone

I am pleased to report to you that for two consecutive years now, the Diocese of Saint Augustine has been judged to be in full compliance with the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*.

The Gavin Group audited the diocese for the second year during the week of Dec. 13, 2004. This independent investigative firm is headed by William Gavin, a former FBI official with nearly 30 years of experience at the Bureau. The Gavin Group has been charged by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to monitor the progress of dioceses across the country in implementing the *Charter*. The *Charter*, you will recall, was produced by the American bishops at their Dallas meeting in June 2002, and has received the approval of the Holy See.

The 2003 audit focused on whether our diocese actually had structures and programs in place to insure a safe environment for our youth. The 2004 audit, just completed, focused on whether those programs were functioning properly at both the diocesan and the parish level.

Also, during the period covered by last year's audit, credible allegations of sexual abuse were made against two priests, who were serving in our diocese more than 30 years ago when the victims were still minors. One of the priests is deceased; the other, who is in his 80s, lives out of the country. Our Diocesan Review Board addressed both cases. In one of the cases, I personally met with the victims in order to help them bring closure to their tragic experience.

Our most recent auditors were two former FBI agents employed by the Gavin Group. They interviewed diocesan staff, members of the Diocesan Review Board, diocesan clergy and some parishioners. At the end of their weeklong examination, they met with me personally to discuss their report, which was a thorough, objective and independent assessment of our efforts to safeguard our youth. It was largely positive, but did point out several areas where our efforts could be improved. Since our diocese was found to be in full compliance with the *Charter*, our audit for 2005 will be a self-audit, in which we respond to information requested from the Gavin Group.

As a result of the audit, I have already taken steps to enhance our safe environment efforts. I have restructured our Diocesan Review Board (formerly, the Response Team) by making it more independent. The new head of the Review Board is retired Circuit Court Judge Virginia Beverly of Jacksonville. The one clergy member of the board is Father Joseph Meehan, an experienced pastor with an impeccable reputation. The board's task will be to examine and address allegations of sexual child abuse by clergy, religious or other church personnel. They will make recommendations directly to me regarding corrective actions, accountability and means to prevent a recurrence of any substantiated acts of abuse.

We, as a diocese, are charged with ensuring that our youth can study, pray and play in a safe environment. Just as in other dioceses, we accomplish this in part by conducting background checks and providing safe environment training programs (*Protecting God's Children*). All parish, school and diocesan clergy, religious and lay employees, as well as certain "covered" volunteers are required to take part in these programs. Though we do have systems for tracking compliance with these requirements, and though our compliance rates exceed 85 percent, this area could still use some improvement. We are currently developing uniform standards of accountability for our parishes, schools and diocesan institutions, which will better assure 100 percent compliance in these areas. Our goal is not merely a safe environment for our youth, but the safest environment possible.

The *Charter* and the two audits conducted thus far are just a few of the steps taken by the Catholic bishops of this country to rebuild the trust of our Catholic laity. In addition, I have put in place a diocesan Victim Assistance Coordinator. I urge you to contact this person directly if your child is the

victim of abusive conduct by clergy, religious, lay employees or church volunteers, or if you have knowledge of an occurrence of abuse. The Victim Assistance Coordinator can be contacted at (904) 262-3200, ext. 129, or (800) 775-4659, ext. 129. All calls are confidential.

Note: The complete 2nd annual Report on the Implementation of the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People and electronic versions of the executive summaries for each diocese/eparchy audited are available online at www.usccb.org.