

Statement by President of the U.S. Catholic Bishops on Sexual Abuse

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The Catholic Church in the United States is in a very grave crisis, perhaps the gravest we have faced. This crisis is not about a lack of faith in God. In fact, those Catholics who live their faith actively day by day will tell you that their faith in God is not in jeopardy. It has indeed been tested by this crisis. But it is very much intact.

The crisis, in truth, is about a profound loss of confidence by the faithful in our leadership as shepherds, because of our failures in addressing the crime of the sexual abuse of children and young people by priests and church personnel.

What we are facing is not a breakdown in belief, but a rupture in the relationship, in our relationship as bishops with the faithful. And this breakdown is understandable. We did not go far enough to ensure that every child and minor was safe from sexual abuse. Rightfully, the faithful are questioning why we failed to take the necessary steps.

The unity for which the Lord prayed fervently for his disciples and his church on the night before he died, a unity that sadly has been broken too often in our history as a church, is in serious danger of being fractured again, this time, within our beloved church in the United States.

These are times that cry out for a genuine reconciliation in the church in our country, not a reconciliation that merely binds a wound so that we can move forward together in some hobbled kind of fashion. What we need is a reconciliation that heals, one that brings us together to address this issue in a way that ensures that it will not happen again, one that begins with the love of the truth that is Jesus Christ, one that embraces fully and honestly the authentic elements of the sacrament of penance as we celebrated in the Catholic tradition.

Only by truthful confession, heartfelt contrition and firm purpose of amendment can we hope to receive the generous mercy of God and the forgiveness of our brothers and sisters. The penance that is necessary here is not the obligation of the church at large in the United States, but the responsibility of the bishops ourselves.

Both what we have done or what we have failed to do contributed to the sexual abuse of children and young people by clergy and church personnel. Moreover, our God-given duty as shepherds of the Lord's people holds us responsible and accountable to God and to the church for the spiritual and moral health of all of God's children, especially those who are weak and most vulnerable. It is we who need to confess, and so we do.

We are the ones, whether through ignorance or lack of vigilance or, God forbid, with

knowledge, who allowed priest abusers to remain in ministry and reassigned them to communities where they continued to abuse.

We are the ones who chose not to report the criminal actions of priests to the authorities, because the law did not require this.

We are the ones who worried more about the possibility of scandal than bringing about the kind of openness that helps prevent abuse.

And we are the ones who, at times, responded to victims and their families as adversaries and not as suffering members of the church.

Our confession is matched by a heartfelt contrition to the victim survivors. I want to say this: If we bishops have learned anything, it is how devastating are the effects of sexual abuse on the children and young people who suffer it. Even the passage of many years does not wipe away the memory of these terrible crimes. And so often, beyond the wounds inflicted on the memory, a person's whole personality also shows the results of these violations of innocence.

Those of us who have not experienced sexual abuse in our childhood can never fully understand what it has done to you. But I promise you this. We bishops will make every effort to take on your perspective, to see the world and the church through your eyes and to look at our own actions over the last decade from your point of view.

More importantly, in my own name and in the name of all of the bishops, I express the most profound apology to each of you who have suffered sexual abuse by a priest or another official of the church. I am deeply and will be forever sorry for the harm you have suffered. We ask your forgiveness.

To the parents and families of the victim survivors, I want to say this. God has blessed the bond between a husband and wife in the church as a sacrament, as a real sign of his abiding presence in your marriage. The fullest blessing that God can give you in your marriage is the gift of children.

In the act of parenting, you become partners with God in the creation of new life, and your family becomes a domestic church where your children first hear the gospel of the Lord Jesus. You have a great responsibility. But how can we bishops dare to look you parents in the eye and tell you that your children are your greatest treasure if we do not also treasure and love and protect them?

I promise you this. Following the example of the Lord Jesus, today we bishops recommit ourselves to placing the protection of your children first. And I am confident that the work we will do together over the next few days here in Dallas and every day thereafter will confirm that promise with solid action to provide for the safety of your children in the church.

As a prelude to that work, in my own name and the name of all the bishops, I express a profound apology to each of you who have children or family members who have suffered sexual abuse by a priest or another representative of the church. I am deeply and will be forever sorry for the harm that you have suffered as a parent or loved one of a victim survivor. We ask your forgiveness.

I need to say a word to the deacons, the religious and the laity. These past few months have been a time of enormous challenge and heartbreak for you. We bishops are deeply aware of the confusion and the disillusionment that you have experienced because of failures in our leadership. We know that these have been especially difficult times for those of you who serve the church in religious institutes, in parishes and schools and in the many social works of the church throughout our country.

To each of you and in the name of all of the bishops, I offer a profound apology for the hurt and the embarrassment you have suffered. We ask your forgiveness.

I also want to express to the deacons, religious and laity our deepest gratitude for the faithful way which you continued your generous service in, and the love of, the church, despite the pain you have felt. Your selfless service to the church and to society is vital to the good of the human community and the church.

In a special way, I want you to know how grateful we bishops are for the loving support you have continued to show to our good priests. They have told us often how much your care and your concern means to them.

To our faithful priests, I want to say this on behalf of the bishops. The Holy Spirit in the sacrament of orders unites us to you as our first collaborators in ministry, and we love you as our brothers.

We are also proud of and grateful for the selfless way in which you serve the Lord, your brothers and sisters day after day. We bishops are profoundly sorry that mistakes we have made in dealing with priest abusers have caused some to call into question your own good name and your reputation as priests. We are also sorry that failures in our leadership have led to a breakdown of trust between priests and bishops, brothers in ministry. We ask your forgiveness. I ask our priests to continue to work closely with us. We need you.

Let us together ask God to grant us the grace we need for a full renewal of the priesthood and the episcopate in this country to genuine holiness of life and Christ-like service. This is what the Lord asks of us. The church deserves nothing less.

My brother bishops, there is a lot of anger among us in this room, rightful anger. Since 1985, as a conference and individually as diocese and bishops, we have been working on the problem of sexual abuse to ensure as much as is humanly possible that the church would be a safe environment for our children. In 1992, after seven years of study and work that included listening sessions with victim survivors and other members of the church, consultation with experts and experimentation with policy on the diocese level,

we together adopted five principles to follow in dealing with accusations of sexual abuse.

The vast majority of bishops embraced those principles, made them the standard for policies on sexual abuse in their diocese and, therefore, contributed effectively to the protection of children in the church.

These policies, however, were not implemented effectively in every diocese across the country. In a matter of a few months, this has become painfully clear. The very solid and good work that has been accomplished by the majority of bishops in their dioceses has been completely overshadowed by the imprudent decisions of a number of bishops during the past 10 years.

It is as if the fabric of the good work that's been accomplished had never existed or had completely unraveled. The anger over this is very real and very understandable. I know. I feel it myself. But I cannot remain there. And neither can any of you.

I offer two suggestions, two challenges really. First, in your own name and in mine, I have been asking for a lot of forgiveness this morning, from the victim survivors, from the parents and families of the victim survivors, from the deacons, the religious and the laity and from our priests. The reconciliation and the healing that we need at this moment in the life of the church in this country will never happen unless God's grace provides a flood of forgiveness. Let us be models of forgiveness to one another.

I believe that the grace for us to forgive one another is there. Let us each in our own hearts ask God for the measure that we need. He will not disappoint.

Second, may I suggest that we use the energy that could so easily fuel our anger in a thoroughly constructive way to complete the work that we have come to Dallas to accomplish. We have much to do and little time in which to do it.

We need to put aside that which would distract us and set our sights solely on the task at hand -- a full and recommitted effort toward the protection of our children and young people. Together, we must ensure that every child in America is protected from sexual abuse by a priest or any representative of the church. The resolve that we bishops bring to the work before us is nourished by a firm purpose of amendment.

The failures of the past must not be repeated. Having faced and acknowledged our mistakes and expressed heartfelt sorrow for those failures, we bishops need to complete once and for all the work we began together almost 20 years ago to make our church as safe an environment as is humanly possible for our children and young people.

In order that our work might be on the surest footing, having dealt as honestly with the past as we are able, I would like to speak a brief word to three groups of people.

To victim survivors, if there is anyone who has been a victim of sexual abuse by a priest or representative of the church in the United States and has not yet already reported this

fact, I ask you to report it to the bishop of your diocese and to the appropriate civil authorities. Though this may be a very difficult step for you, the church does love you and wants to help you find justice and healing.

To priests, if there is any priest who is responsible for the crime of the sexual abuse of a child or a young person and your bishop is not aware of this fact, I ask you to come forward to your bishop and report this fact, so that justice and the church will be served, and you will be able to live honestly with your own conscience.

To my brother bishops, if there is any bishop who has sexually abused a child or young person, I ask you to report this fact to the nunciature so that justice and the church will be served, and you will be able to live honestly with your own conscience.

During the past five months, the sexual abuse of children and young people, especially by priests, has been a focus of the national and local media. In my own many encounters with the media, I have been treated usually, if not invariably, with consideration. I have a great respect for the power of the media to do good. If, as seems to be the case, the current attention has helped victims of the case to come forward, this has been a great service.

I am particularly pleased that the media have also given greater attention recently to the issue of the sexual abuse of children and young people as a societal problem.

But I ask the media to allow me a moment of complete candor. During these last months, the image of the Catholic hierarchy in this country has been distorted to an extent which I would have not thought possible six months ago. Sad and disturbing facts, often long in the past, have been readily presented in ways that create an erroneous image of the church in 2002 as neglectful and uncaring in a matter about which we bishops have cared a great deal for many years now.

The advances we have made in trying to overcome the problem of the sexual abuse of children and young people have not been so quickly reported -- more stringent screening of seminary candidates, seminary formation that makes healthy development a major goal and procedures to remove from ministry those who have proven a threat to children and young people.

I am not only proud to defend this body from these distortions, I do it as a matter of justice, to set the record straight, so that the work we bishops will be doing today and tomorrow will be in its proper perspective as an important piece of work that we have been doing together for 20 years.

There has, indeed, been some very thoughtful media coverage and editorial analysis alongside this hysterical and distorted coverage, analysis which has provided real insight into the issue. We bishops accept the challenge of this insightful coverage to do better in the fulfillment of our responsibilities.

As we accept that challenge, I count on you, the media, to report fully and fairly on what

we do these days and in the days and the years to come. When all is said and done, the Catholic Church in the United States remains the single largest provider, private provider of services, care formation and education for children throughout this nation. And we do that service well, effectively and from the hearts of a very faithful people.

You who serve in the media have challenged us bishops well by calling us to better action in the fulfillment of our responsibilities. I extend the same courtesy to you and challenge you to do the same in the fulfillment of your own responsibility.

The task that we bishops have before us these days in Dallas is enormous and daunting. We are called to put into place policies that will ensure the full protection of our children and young people and to bring an end to sexual abuse in the church. This we will do.

Sadly, however, no decisions or policies that we make or put in place can save our children from human depravity. Our actions will have to be matched by an uncommon and persistent vigilance.

As we set about this task, we bishops are very conscious of the fact that we were not able to come to this moment alone, nor will we be able to complete it alone. We realize, as perhaps never before, our corporate need for and this grace-filled opportunity of working more collaboratively with our devoted laity, religious and clergy.

We rely on the voices that have been chosen to be helpful from within and outside of the church. On behalf of the bishops, I want to thank the many people who have written or called us to offer insights about how we might deal with the issue of sexual abuse within the church. We are deeply grateful for your assistance, and I can promise you that we will be looking for it to continue into the future as we explore new ways to ensure the protection of our children and young people.

It is my fervent hope that the successful work we do in the church to address sexual abuse will be of great assistance to our society at large. It is no secret among those who have responsibility for children that the issue of sexual abuse of children and young people is one that plagues all sectors of our society.

I look forward to exploring creative ways in which we might work more fully and effectively with other groups in our society toward strengthening the protection of children. These have been months and years and decades of tremendous suffering and pain, especially for the victim survivors and their families, but also for many others in the church.

I renew my faith in the word of St. Paul: "Where sin has increased, grace has far surpassed it." And I invite each of you to do the same.

In Jesus Christ, there is no cross without resurrection, no death without life, no purgation without cleansing and grace. Let us embrace the grace that God gives us so abundantly so that the work we do these days together may be to his glory and contribute to full

reconciliation and healing in the church.

God bless each one of you.