

Bishop Gregory issues statement on sexual abuse of minors by priests

WASHINGTON, 2002 - In a statement on the sexual abuse of minors by priests, the President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops expressed "profound sorrow that some of our priests were responsible for this abuse under our watch."

"We understand that your children are your most precious gift," Bishop Wilton D. Gregory said. "They are our children as well, and we continue to apologize to the victims, and to their parents and their loved ones for this failure in our pastoral responsibilities."

The attention to this issue also gives me the opportunity to renew the promise of our bishops that we will continue to take all the steps necessary to protect our youth from this kind of abuse in society and in the church," he said. Bishop Gregory said he was speaking on behalf of all of the bishops and as a pastor and a teacher of faith and morals. In the statement, which was sent to all Catholic bishops in the United States and widely disseminated, Bishop Gregory spoke of what has been done to address this problem over the course of the past two decades, and the kinds of policies and procedures that continue to be implemented. "While we deplore the sexual abuse of young people, especially that committed by a cleric, we are confident that the numbers of priests involved in such criminal activity are few," Bishop Gregory said. "The damage, however, has been immeasurable. The toll this phenomenon has taken on our people and our ministry is tremendous."

"Today, heightened seminary-screening processes attempt to identify and weed out unhealthy candidates for the priesthood. Workshops are designed to help people define and understand boundaries, with the assurance that the law will address those unable to abide by them. We have urged our dioceses to form review boards of laity and professionals to assist in evaluating accusations as soon as they are received and to review fitness for service. And we have emphatically encouraged our brother bishops to address the needs of victims justly and pastorally."

Bishop Gregory added that, "Catholics continue to celebrate and attend Mass. We visit the sick, counsel the troubled and the destitute, and care for one another. Last year the Catholic church provided social services to 11 million people and health care to more than 77 million patients. The church educated more than 3.5 million students, and welcomed more than 1.2 million into our ranks."

This is a time for Catholic people - bishops, clergy, religious, and laity - to resolve to work together to assure the safety of our children." The full text of the statement is available on the USCCB conference website, www.usccb.org.