

Affirming Our Episcopal Commitments

THUS SHOULD ONE REGARD US: AS SERVANTS OF CHRIST
AND STEWARDS OF THE MYSTERIES OF GOD. NOW IT IS OF COURSE
REQUIRED OF STEWARDS THAT THEY BE FOUND TRUSTWORTHY (1 COR 4:1-2).

The document *Affirming Our Episcopal Commitments* was developed by the Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). It was approved by the full body of bishops as a formal statement of the same at its June 2019 General Meeting and has been authorized for publication by the undersigned.

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The authority and responsibilities of a bishop arise fundamentally from the grace of the sacrament of Holy Orders. For the bishop to exercise his authority and responsibilities properly, however, he must be conformed to the heart of Christ, who “humbled himself” for our sake (Phil 2:8). “In the exercise of sacred power, the bishop must show himself to be rich in humanity in imitation of Jesus, the perfect man. To this end, his conduct should radiate those virtues and human gifts which arise from charity and are rightly valued in our society. These gifts and human virtues bear fruit in pastoral prudence, in wise care of souls and in good governance” (*Apostolorum successores*, 2004, no. 47).

In keeping with the promises made at his episcopal ordination, a bishop is to guide others to holiness, to welcome the stranger, the poor, and all those in need. He is to act as a good shepherd, especially attentive to those on the peripheries. Some bishops have failed in keeping to these promises by committing acts of sexual abuse or

sexual misconduct themselves. Others have failed by not responding morally, pastorally, and effectively to allegations of abuse or misconduct perpetrated by other bishops, priests and deacons. Because of these failures, the faithful are outraged, horrified, and discouraged.

We, the bishops of the United States, have heard the anger expressed by so many within and outside of the Church over these failures. The anger is justified; it has humbled us, prompting us into self-examination, repentance, and a desire to do better. We will continue to listen.

Today, in a spirit of pastoral responsibility and contrition, we affirm once more the commitments we made when we

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were ordained bishops, including the commitments to respond directly and appropriately to cases of sexual abuse of minors or vulnerable persons, sexual misconduct, and the mishandling of such cases by bishops. “This responsibility falls, above all, on the successors of the Apostles... and demands from [us] a commitment to follow closely the path of the Divine Master” (*Vos estis lux mundi*, 2019, preamble).

1. We will continue to reach out to the victims/survivors of sexual abuse by the clergy and their families in support of their spiritual and emotional well-being. Realizing that we might not always be the best suited to offer such care, we will do all that is within our authority and ability to help victims/survivors find the care and healing they need.
2. We pledge our full support for and adherence to the provisions outlined in the Holy Father’s Apostolic Letter *motu proprio*, *Vos estis lux mundi*, which holds bishops accountable to higher moral standards because the pastoral care of the faithful has been entrusted to them.

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3. We will promote and disseminate widely—in our churches, seminaries, diocesan or eparchial newspapers, parish bulletins, websites, social media, and other appropriate venues—information on how a person can report to an independent, third-party entity any instances of the sexual abuse of a minor or vulnerable persons by a bishop. While safeguarding confidentiality of all persons involved, every effort will be made toward transparency and keeping the person submitting the report, and when permitted the accused, apprised of the status of the case.
4. We are also committed, when we receive or when we are authorized to investigate such cases, to include the counsel of lay men and women whose professional backgrounds are indispensable.
5. We will amend, where necessary, our diocesan or eparchial codes of conduct for ministers so that they state unequivocally that they apply to bishops as well as to all those serving the Church in our diocese or eparchy.
6. We will also make sure that these codes of conduct contain clear explanations as to what constitutes sexual misconduct with adults as well as what constitutes sexual harassment of adults.
7. Both our Baptism and ordination call us to chaste living. We will be always mindful that there can be no “double life,” no “special circumstances,” no “secret life” in the practice of chastity.

8. “The bishop cannot ignore or leave undone the task of holding up to the world the great truth of a holy and chaste Church, in her ministers and in her faithful. When situations of scandal [and sin] arise, especially on the part of the Church’s ministers,” we promise to “act firmly and decisively, justly and serenely” (*Apostolorum successores*, no. 44). We commit ourselves “to ensuring that those who state that they have been harmed, together with their families, are to be treated with dignity and respect, and, in particular, are to be: welcomed, listened to and supported, including through provision of specific services; offered spiritual assistance; offered medical assistance, including therapeutic and psychological assistance, as required by the specific case” (*Vos estis lux mundi*, art. 5, §1).

We understand “scandal” not only in terms of how such allegations damage the image of the Church, but more so in how such sinful behavior injures the victim and causes others to lose faith in the Church. Our first response will be to provide for the pastoral care of the person who is making the allegation, as well as follow the established church and civil procedures to investigate. This will be done in cooperation with lay experts and civil authorities.

9. We will “participate, whenever possible, in formation gatherings

arranged by various ecclesial bodies” (*Apostolorum successores*, no. 54), especially those offered by the USCCB, in regard to best practices in preventing and dealing with sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable persons, and sexual misconduct with or sexual harassment of adults, seeking the help of experts in these fields.

10. Finally, when proposing names for the office of bishop, we will offer candidates truly suitable for the episcopacy. “For a bishop as God’s steward must be blameless, not arrogant, not irritable, not a drunkard, not aggressive, not greedy for sordid gain, but hospitable, a lover of goodness, temperate, just, holy, and self-controlled...” (Titus 1:7-8).

In his personal letter to the U.S. bishops in January 2019, Pope Francis reminded us that the consequences

of our failures cannot be fixed by being administrators of new programs or committees. They can only be resolved by humility, listening, self-examination, and conversion. It is our hope that by obeying the Word of God and embracing what the Church expects of us, we will imitate Christ, the Good Shepherd.

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