

Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People
June 2026 Plenary Assembly
FINAL APPROVED VERSION

Preamble

In recent times, the Church in the United States has experienced a crisis without precedent. The sexual abuse of children and young people by some deacons, priests, bishops, and others in church service has caused enormous pain, anger, and confusion for victims/survivors, their families, and the entire Church—as have the ways in which these crimes and sins were addressed.¹ As bishops, we have acknowledged our mistakes and our roles in that suffering, and we again apologize and take responsibility for too often failing victims/survivors and the Catholic faithful in the past. From the depths of our hearts, we bishops express great sorrow and profound regret for what the faithful and the broader community have endured.

¹ Since the last revision of the *Charter* in 2018, the Catholic Church has addressed instances of sexual abuse and misconduct that do not fall under the purview of this *Charter*. For example, a 2023 apostolic letter issued *motu proprio* by Pope Francis, *Vos estis lux mundi*, includes a means of reporting, and a procedure for investigating, reports of alleged sexual abuse by a bishop, as well as reports that allege a bishop’s interference with or avoidance of a civil or canonical investigation of abuse that was allegedly committed by another person in church service. See Pope Francis, *Vos estis lux mundi* (VELM), March 25, 2023, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/20230325-motu-proprio-vos-estis-lux-mundi-aggiornato.html; Pope Francis, *Come una madre amorevole*, June 4, 2016; USCCB, *Directives of the Implementation of the Provisions of Vos estis lux mundi Concerning Bishops and Their Equivalents*, June 2019; USCCB, *Affirming Our Episcopal Commitments*, June 2019, no. 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”; USCCB, *A Statement of Episcopal Commitment*, November 2018, no. 2.

In addition, the revised Book VI of the *Code of Canon Law* addresses crimes related to sexual abuse more broadly. Instances of clerical sexual misconduct involving adults are likewise not within the scope of this *Charter*. See *Code of Canon Law: Latin-English Edition: New English Translation (Codex iuris canonici [CIC])*, 4th ed. (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 2023); see also *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches: New English Translation (Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium [CCEO])* (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 2024). Cited hereafter as CIC and CCEO in the text.

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We share Pope Leo XIV's conviction: "It is urgent to root in the whole church a culture of prevention that does not tolerate any form of abuse—neither of power or authority, nor abuse of conscience, spiritual or sexual abuse." He explained, "This culture will only be authentic if it is born of active vigilance, of transparent processes and sincere listening to those who have been hurt."²

With this revision of the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, we reaffirm our deep commitment to sustain and strengthen safe environments within the Church for children and youth. We have listened to the profound pain and suffering of those victimized by sexual abuse and will continue to respond to their cries. We have agonized over the sinfulness, the criminality, and the breach of trust perpetrated by some members of the clergy. We have determined, as best we can, the extent, causes, and context of this problem of the abuse of minors by clergy in our country. We continue to learn about the problem of sexual abuse and will use what we have learned to strengthen our protection of the children and young people in our care and to cooperate with law enforcement in the investigation of clergy, employees, and volunteers.

We continue to have special care for victims/survivors of sexual abuse and their families, and we continue to reach out to them. The physical, emotional, and spiritual damage caused by the sexual abuse of minors is devastating and long-lasting. We apologize to each victim/survivor for the grave harm that has been inflicted on him or her, and we commit to help now and in the future. The loss of trust that often results from such abuse becomes even more tragic when it leads to a loss of the faith that we have a sacred duty to foster. We make our own the words of St. John Paul II: The sexual abuse of young people is "by every standard wrong and rightly considered

² Pope Leo XIV, quoted in Franklin Briceño, "Pope Leo XIV Says There Should Be No Tolerance for Abuse of Any Kind in Catholic Church," Associated Press, June 21, 2025, apnews.com/article/pope-abuse-peru-leo-sodalitium-clergy-ugaz-7472664cef836f0ee9d2456fd219559a.

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a crime by society; it is also an appalling sin in the eyes of God.”³ We will continue to help victims/survivors heal from these crimes, and we will strive to prevent these tragedies from occurring in the future.

Along with the victims/survivors and their families, the entire Catholic community we serve—including clergy who have not committed wrongful acts and those who have been falsely accused—has suffered because of this scandal and its consequences. The loss of trust has compromised the ministry of the Church, including the consolation and healing the Church exists to bring about. The public scrutiny of the ordained men who have betrayed their calling has caused concern among faithful priests and deacons about the possibility of being falsely accused and misunderstood in their ministry. This scrutiny often casts over them an undeserved air of suspicion. We bishops share with all priests and deacons a firm commitment to live out our vocation to Holy Orders as a life of service to others after the example of Christ our Lord.

As those who have been given the responsibility of shepherding God’s people, we will—with the help of God and in full collaboration with all the faithful—continue to work to restore the bonds of trust that unite us. We have seen that words alone cannot accomplish this goal. We will continue taking action both on the national level and at home in our dioceses and eparchies.

We feel a particular responsibility for “the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18) given to us by God, to whom we are reconciled through Christ. “The love of Christ impels us” (2 Cor 5:14) to ask forgiveness for our own faults and also to appeal to all—those who have been victimized, those who have offended, and all who have felt the wound of this scandal—to be reconciled to God and one another.

³ St. John Paul II, Address to the Cardinals of the United States and Conference Officers, April 23, 2002, no. 1, www.usccb.org/resources/ADDRESS-OF-JOHN-PAUL-II.pdf.

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Perhaps in a way we have never before experienced, we feel the power of sin that has touched our entire church family in this country. But as St. Paul boldly says, God made Christ “to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor 5:21). May we who have known sin also experience, through a spirit of reconciliation, God’s own righteousness. We know that after such profound hurt has taken place, healing and reconciliation are beyond human capacity alone. God’s grace and mercy will lead us forward, trusting Christ’s promise that “for God all things are possible” (Mt 19:26).

We here also acknowledge and reaffirm the faithful service of the vast majority of our priests and deacons, and we emphasize the love that people have for them. For their good work, they deservedly have the esteem of us, their bishops, and of the faithful.

In a special way, we are grateful to those victims/survivors of clergy sexual abuse and their families who have shared their stories and helped us understand more fully the consequences of such a reprehensible violation of sacred trust. We join Pope Leo XIV, who offered in prayer during the Jubilee of Consolation, “The Church, some of whose members have unfortunately hurt you, kneels with you today before our Mother. May we all learn from her to protect the most vulnerable with tenderness! May we learn to listen to your wounds and walk together. May we receive from Our Lady of Sorrows the strength to recognize that life is not defined only by the evil we suffer, but by the love of God, who never abandons us and guides the whole Church.”⁴

Let there be no doubt or confusion on anyone’s part: For us, your bishops, our obligation to protect children and young people and to prevent sexual abuse flows from the mission and example given to us by Jesus Christ himself, in whose name we serve.

⁴ Pope Leo XVI, Prayer Vigil at the Jubilee of Consolation, September 15, 2025, www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/homilies/2025/documents/20250915-vegliagiubileo-consolazione.html.

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Jesus extended this care in a tender way to children, rebuking his disciples for keeping them away from him: “Let the children come to me” (Mt 19:14). And he uttered a grave warning about anyone who seeks to lead the little ones astray, saying that it would be better for such a person “to have a great millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea” (Mt 18:6). We hear these words of the Lord as prophetic for this moment. With a firm determination to restore the bonds of trust, we bishops recommit ourselves to protect minors and to offer continual pastoral outreach to repair the breach—with those who have suffered sexual abuse and with all the faithful.

In this spirit, and for more than two decades, the principles and commitments expressed in this *Charter* have been integrated into church life.

- The Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection provides the focus for a consistent, ongoing, and comprehensive approach to creating a safe environment for young people throughout the Church in the United States. The Secretariat also provides the means for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) to achieve the goals of this *Charter* by serving as a resource to dioceses and eparchies and by producing an Annual Report on *Charter* compliance and implementation (see Article 9 of this *Charter*).
- The National Review Board is a consultative and confidential body that advises the USCCB Committee on the Protection of Children and Young People on matters of protecting minors and accompanying victims/survivors (see Article 10). It functions with the level of independence described in this *Charter*.
- Accordingly, the National Review Board commissioned two foundational studies conducted by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice: *The Nature and Scope of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States 1950-2002*, and *The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States*,

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1950-2010. The resulting reports have provided powerful tools for us to examine our past and have established a basis for education, prevention, and accountability.⁵

- Every diocese/eparchy has designated a competent person to coordinate assistance and pastoral care for victims/survivors and to provide them with accompaniment (see Article 2; Essential Norm 3).⁶
- Bishops in every diocese/eparchy are advised and assisted by review boards in making the decisions necessary to fulfill this *Charter* (see Article 2) and the *Essential Norms for Diocesan/Eparchial Policies Dealing with Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests or Deacons* (see Essential Norm 4).
- Safeguarding measures are in place to strengthen the Church's efforts to keep minors safe.

By taking these steps and many others, we remain committed to ensuring the safety of our children and young people and to accompanying victims/survivors. We also have learned much in recent years about the complexities and difficulties involved in assessing allegations of criminal and sinful activity. We commit ourselves always to act on the presumption of the sincerity of those who bring forth a complaint of sexual abuse. However, our response will include a corresponding presumption of innocence on the

⁵ John Jay College of Criminal Justice, *The Nature and Scope of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States 1950-2002* (Washington, DC: USCCB, February 2004), www.usccb.org/sites/default/files/issues-and-action/child-and-youth-protection/upload/The-Nature-and-Scope-of-Sexual-Abuse-of-Minors-by-Catholic-Priests-and-Deacons-in-the-United-States-1950-2002.pdf; and John Jay College of Criminal Justice, *The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950-2010* (Washington, DC: USCCB, May 2011), www.usccb.org/sites/default/files/issues-and-action/child-and-youth-protection/upload/The-Causes-and-Context-of-Sexual-Abuse-of-Minors-by-Catholic-Priests-in-the-United-States-1950-2010.pdf.

⁶ See USCCB, *Essential Norms for Diocesan/Eparchial Policies Dealing with Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests or Deacons*, revised June 17, 2005, and promulgated May 5, 2006.

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part of the accused until guilt is proven. The proper respect for all persons' rights is paramount. As recognized in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and canon law, the dignity of the human person requires such an approach.

The reported cases of sexual abuse pertaining to clergy have decreased significantly since the early 1990s, and even more so since 2002. Although sexual abuse continues to be a scourge in society in general, we believe the Church is increasingly becoming a safe place for minors and a place to receive help.

Thus, with a vivid sense of the effort still necessary to confront the effects of this crisis fully, and with the wisdom gained by experience, we have reviewed and revised this *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*. We remain committed to assist in the healing of those who have been injured. We will do all in our power to protect children and young people. And we will work with our clergy, persons in consecrated life and societies of apostolic life, and laity to restore trust and harmony in our faith communities, as we pray for the Kingdom of God to come here on earth as it is in heaven.

To make effective our goals—of fostering a safe environment within the Church for children and young people, and of preventing sexual abuse of minors by clergy in the future—we, the Catholic bishops of the United States, have outlined in this *Charter* a series of practical and pastoral steps, and we commit ourselves to taking them in our dioceses and eparchies.

Article 1

Dioceses/eparchies are to reach out to victims/survivors and their families, to accompany them, and to demonstrate a sincere commitment to their physical, spiritual, and emotional well-being. The Church's first obligation with victims/survivors is to work for healing and reconciliation. Each diocese/eparchy is to continue reaching out to persons who, as minors, have been the victims/survivors of sexual abuse by anyone in church service, whether the abuse was recent or occurred many years in the past. This

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outreach may include counseling services, spiritual assistance, support groups, healing opportunities, and other social services agreed upon by the victim/survivor (or his or her parent or guardian) and the diocese/eparchy. This outreach also includes providing clear explanations of diocesan procedures and reporting processes and responding timely to inquiries.

In providing pastoral outreach to victims/survivors and their families, the diocesan/eparchial bishop or his representative is to offer to meet with them and to listen with humility and compassion to their experiences and concerns. As Pope Francis explained, “By an attitude of prayer and penance, we will become attuned as individuals and as a community to this exhortation, so that we may grow in the gift of compassion, in justice, prevention and reparation.”⁷

We commit ourselves as bishops to work with the faithful and with all to foster reconciliation among all people in our dioceses/eparchies. We especially commit ourselves to accompany those individuals who were themselves abused and with the communities who have suffered because of the sexual abuse of minors that occurred in their midst.

Article 2

Dioceses/eparchies are to publish and follow policies and procedures to respond promptly to any allegation where there is reason to believe that sexual abuse of a minor has occurred. Dioceses/eparchies are to arrange for a competent person (or persons) to coordinate assistance for the immediate pastoral care of persons who report having been sexually abused as minors by clergy or other church personnel. The procedures for making a complaint must be made readily available in printed form and also be accessible through other

⁷ Pope Francis, Letter of His Holiness to the People of God, August 20, 2018, no. 2, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180820_lettera-popolo-didio.html.

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media in the principal languages in which the diocese/eparchy celebrates the liturgy. These procedures will be the subject of public announcements at least annually.

Dioceses/eparchies are also to have a review board that functions as a confidential consultative body for the diocesan or eparchial bishop. The majority of the board members are to be lay persons who are not employees of the diocese/eparchy (see Essential Norm 5). The review board is intended to advise the diocesan/eparchial bishop in his assessment of allegations of sexual abuse of minors, in his determination of a cleric's suitability for ministry, and in his review and, when needed, updating of diocesan/eparchial policies for dealing with the sexual abuse of minors (see Essential Norm 4). The board can review these matters both retrospectively and prospectively and give advice on all aspects of responses connected with these cases. "The process for offering advice and for determining the board's recommendations should be free from intimidation or the appearance of such."⁸

Article 3

Dioceses/eparchies are not to enter into settlements that bind the parties to confidentiality unless (1) the victim/survivor freely requests confidentiality and (2) this request is noted in the text of the agreement.

Article 4

Dioceses/eparchies are to report any allegation of sexual abuse of a minor to law enforcement or the designated civil authorities.

⁸ See USCCB, *Diocesan and Eparchial Review Board Resource Booklet* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2026), 14, www.usccb.org/resources/Diocesan%20and%20Eparchial%20Review%20Board%20Resource%20Booklet%202026%20Digital%20Version.pdf.

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Diocesan/eparchial personnel are to comply with all applicable civil laws with respect to reporting allegations of sexual abuse of minors to law enforcement or the designated civil authorities, regardless of when the alleged abuse occurred. Dioceses/eparchies will cooperate in their investigations in accord with the law of the jurisdiction in question.

Reporting and investigating allegations of sexual abuse of minors will be undertaken with due regard for the seal of the Sacrament of Penance, which is always inviolable (CIC, cc. 983, 1386; CCEO, cc. 733, 1456).

When required by canon law, bishops are to report to the Holy See allegations of sexual abuse of a minor by a cleric.⁹ Clerics and nonordained members of institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life are also to be reminded of their canonical obligation to report allegations to competent church authorities. Any person, including laity who serve in offices or exercise ministries in the Church, can report allegations to church authorities as well (VELM I, art. 3 §2).

In every instance, dioceses/eparchies are to advise victims/survivors of their right to make a report to civil authorities and will support this right.

Article 5

We affirm the words of St. John Paul II in his 2002 address to the cardinals of the United States and Conference officers: “There is no place in the priesthood or religious life for those who would harm the young” (no. 3). This insistence has been reiterated throughout the pontificates of Pope Benedict XVI, Pope Francis, and most recently Pope Leo XIV. All acknowledged failures of the past and

⁹ Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Norms Regarding Delicts Reserved to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith*, October 11, 2021, art. 10 §1, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20211011_norme-delittiriservati-cfaith_en.html, and VELM, I, art. 3 §1; CIC c. 1371 §6; CCEO, c. 1446 §4.

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affirmed their commitment to honor the courage and dignity of victims, while ensuring that the Church upholds a fair, transparent, and judicious process to discern the facts and remove from ministry those who have harmed children.

Sexual abuse of a minor by a cleric is a crime in the universal law of the Church (CIC, c. 1398 §1; CCEO, c. 1453 §5). Because of the seriousness of this matter, jurisdiction is reserved to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.¹⁰ Sexual abuse of a minor is also a crime in all civil jurisdictions of the United States.

Any cleric who is accused of sexual abuse of a minor is presumed innocent from the time of the allegation until the cleric either formally confesses to the crime as alleged or a canonical process has resulted in a conviction (CIC, c. 1321 §1; CCEO, c. 1414 §1). All appropriate steps are to be taken so that no illegitimate harm comes to the good reputation of the cleric (CIC, c. 220; CCEO, c. 23). He is to be encouraged to retain civil and canonical counsel and is to be provided with a canonical advocate if he is unable to retain one on his own. Moreover, from the outset of the preliminary investigation, the diocesan/eparchial bishop has the right to impose upon the accused priest or deacon the temporary precautionary measures listed in CIC, canon 1722, in CCEO, canon 1473, and in *Sacramentorum sanctitatis tutela*, art. 10 §2.

Diocesan/eparchial policy will provide that when an act of sexual abuse of a minor—whenever it occurred—is admitted or established after an appropriate process following canon law, the offending priest or deacon is to be permanently removed from ministry and, if warranted, dismissed from the clerical state. In keeping with the stated purpose of this *Charter*, an offending priest or deacon is to be offered therapeutic professional assistance for the purposes both of prevention and also of his own healing and well-being.

¹⁰ See Pope Francis, *Praedicate Evangelium* (Apostolic Constitution on the Roman Curia and Its Service to the Church in the World), March 19, 2022, art. 76, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/20220319-costituzione-ap-praedicate-evangelium.html. See also Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Norms Regarding Delicts*, art. 6.

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The diocesan/eparchial bishop is to exercise his power of governance—within the parameters of the Church’s universal law—to ensure that any priest or deacon subject to his governance who has committed even one act of sexual abuse of a minor shall not continue in ministry.

If the preliminary investigation (CIC, c. 1717 §1; CCEO, c. 1468 §1) indicates that the accusation does not have the semblance of truth, then every possible step is to be taken to acknowledge the good reputation that the cleric possesses and, if appropriate, to return him to some form of ministry. If the priest or deacon is acquitted of the allegations, or if the canonical process has not led to a conviction with moral certitude, efforts will be directed to restore his good reputation with the possible return to ministry, as the circumstances warrant. Continuing support and accompaniment will be provided to the priest or deacon in these circumstances. In fulfilling this article, dioceses/eparchies are to follow the requirements of the universal law of the Church and of the *Essential Norms* approved for the United States.

Article 6

There are to be clear and well publicized diocesan/eparchial standards of ministerial behavior and appropriate boundaries expected of clergy, employees, ministers, and volunteers of the Church in their contact with minors. All clergy, employees, ministers, and volunteers of the Church are to acknowledge and abide by these standards.

Article 7

Dioceses/eparchies are to be open and transparent in communicating with parishes and other church communities about sexual abuse of minors by clergy, within the confines of respect for the right to privacy and the right of all involved not to have their good

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reputation harmed illegitimately. Any communication should keep in mind the safety of the community, the integrity of the investigations, and the presumption of the accused person's innocence.¹¹

Article 8

The Committee on the Protection of Children and Young People is a standing committee of the USCCB. Its membership is to include representation from all fifteen episcopal regions of the country, with new appointments staggered to maintain continuity. Activities of the Committee will be conducted in accord with applicable provisions of canon law and the USCCB Committee Handbook.

The Committee advises the USCCB on matters and recommendations concerning child and youth protection and oversees all matters addressed by the Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection and the National Review Board (see Articles 9 and 10).

The Committee is to work collaboratively with other offices or committees within the USCCB and also with other national and international organizations, including the International Safeguarding Conference, Tutela Minorum (Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors), and other episcopal conferences.

Article 9

The Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection, established by the USCCB in this *Charter*, is to function as one of the USCCB's subject matter experts in advising the Committee on matters related to the protection of minors and the promotion of healing for all

¹¹ For helpful guidance on public communications, see Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Vademecum* "On Certain Points of Procedure in Treating Cases of Sexual Abuse of Minors Committed by Clerics," June 5, 2022, ver. 2.0, especially nos. 29, 45-46, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20200716_vademecum-casi-abuso_en.html.

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who have been harmed by sexual abuse of minors by clerics and other persons in church service. The Secretariat is to provide resources, guidance, and personnel to staff the Committee, and it serves as a primary resource for dioceses/eparchies in implementing the *Charter* and addressing issues related to safeguarding and healing programs. The Secretariat will develop resources as needed for diocesan/eparchial personnel responsible for child and youth protection programs. The Secretariat will provide opportunities for professional development, camaraderie, and support among those who serve in child and youth protection ministry.

The Secretariat is to produce a public Annual Report on the implementation of this *Charter*. The report is to be based on an annual audit process whose method, scope, and cost are to be approved by the USCCB Administrative Committee based on the recommendation of the Committee on the Protection of Children and Young People. The audit's method entails the process and techniques used to determine compliance with the *Charter*. The audit scope will reflect the focus, parameters, and time period for matters examined during an individual audit. The Annual Report can incorporate additional studies and research pertinent to the implementation of this *Charter* and to how Catholic dioceses/eparchies are addressing issues of safeguarding and healing. This public report will include the names of dioceses/eparchies that the audit shows are not in compliance with the provisions and expectations of this *Charter*.

As a member of the Conference staff, the Executive Director of the Secretariat is appointed by and reports to the USCCB's General Secretary. The Executive Director is to provide the Committee on the Protection of Children and Young People and the National Review Board with regular reports about the Secretariat's activities.

Article 10

The Committee on the Protection of Children and Young People is to be assisted by the National Review Board, a consultative body established by the USCCB.

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The Board will advise the Conference President on the appointment of future members of the Board. The Conference President appoints the Board's members in consultation with the Administrative Committee; members are accountable to him and to the USCCB Executive Committee. Before a candidate is contacted, the Chairman of the Committee on the Protection of Children and Young People is to seek and obtain, in writing, the favorable opinion of the candidate's diocesan/eparchial bishop. The Board is to operate in accord with the statutes and bylaws of the USCCB as well as those included in a governing document developed by the Board in consultation with the Committee on the Protection of Children and Young People, as approved by the USCCB Administrative Committee. The governing document sets forth such matters as the Board's purpose and responsibility, membership composition, officers and their duties, terms of office, frequency of meetings, and reports to the Conference President on the Board's activities.

As it collaborates with the Committee on the Protection of Children and Young People, the Board will advise on matters of child and youth protection, specifically on policies and best practices. The Board will review the Annual Report of the Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection on the implementation of this *Charter*, will assess the Annual Report's recommendations, and will provide its own assessment to the Conference President.

The Board and the Committee on the Protection of Children and Young People will meet jointly twice a year.

The Board will be supported by the Secretariat and will in turn assist the Secretariat in developing resources for the protection of children and young people.

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Article 11

This *Charter* is an ecclesial document that reflects our commitments as bishops to provide for those who have been entrusted to our pastoral care. We intend the *Charter* to enhance the processes implemented within the Catholic dioceses/eparchies in the United States. Thus, this *Charter* has no authority in civil law and is not intended to be applicable or have any impact in any secular court or proceedings.

As the Catholic bishops of the United States, we have implemented protocols to hold ourselves accountable to the Holy See and the People of God. The Conference President is to inform the Holy See of this revised *Charter* to indicate the manner in which we as bishops—together with the entire Church in the United States—are continuing our commitment to protect minors and to respond to allegations of sexual abuse of minors by priests and deacons in our dioceses/eparchies. This *Charter* has been written and revised in accord with the directives and norms established by the Holy See and with the *Essential Norms* that are particular law for the dioceses and eparchies of the USCCB. Future changes to canon law, including changes to the *Essential Norms*, will supersede this document if they are in conflict.

As further demonstration of our accountability, the Conference President will also share with the Holy See each Annual Report on the implementation of the *Charter*. The Annual Report sent to the Holy See will include the Audit Report, both of which are described in Article 9 of this *Charter*. The Annual Report is also to be made available to the public.

Article 12

The whole Church must engage in the ministry of maintaining safe environments in the Church for minors.

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Dioceses/eparchies are to actively establish and utilize safe environment training programs that each respective diocesan/eparchial bishop deems to be in accord with Catholic moral principles. These programs are to be conducted cooperatively with parents and guardians, clergy, members of institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life, employees, volunteers, civil authorities, educators, and community organizations. Dioceses/eparchies are to provide continuing education and training for clergy, seminarians, minors, ministers, employees, volunteers, and others about ways to continue developing and maintaining a safe environment for minors. Parents and guardians who do not fall into these ministerial categories are also strongly encouraged to participate in learning and following safe environment protocols and policies.

Education and training programs for adults and youth should include elements of identification of abuse, how to report suspected abuse, and effective measures for preventing abuse.

Church personnel are to participate in continuing education on these matters. Training programs should be renewed and verified according to the policy enacted by the diocesan/eparchial bishop for the diocese/eparchy.

Dioceses/eparchies are to make clear to clergy, seminarians, and other community members the standards of conduct established regarding their interactions with minors (see also Article 6 on developing and publicizing standards of ministerial conduct).

Article 13

The diocesan/eparchial bishop is to evaluate the background of all incardinated priests and deacons, including a criminal background check. When a priest or deacon who is not incardinated in the diocese/eparchy will engage in ministry in the diocese/eparchy,

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regardless of the length of time, the bishop's evaluation of the cleric's background may be satisfied by eliciting and receiving—by written or electronic means—an attestation of his suitability for ministry from his proper ordinary or major superior.¹²

Dioceses/eparchies are to evaluate the backgrounds of all respective diocesan/eparchial, parish/school, and other paid personnel and volunteers whose duties include interaction with minors. Specifically, they are to use the resources of law enforcement and other community agencies. Each diocese/eparchy is to determine the application and renewal of background checks according to local practice. In addition, dioceses/eparchies are to employ adequate screening and evaluative techniques in deciding the fitness of candidates for ordination.¹³

Article 14

Transfers for residence—including for retirement—of all priests and deacons who have committed an act of sexual abuse against a minor shall be in accord with Essential Norm 12.¹⁴

¹² In 2009, after consultation with members of the USCCB Committee on the Protection of Children and Young People and the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, followed by approval from the USCCB Committee on Canonical Affairs and Church Governance, additional model letters of suitability—now available on the USCCB website—were agreed upon and published for use by bishops and major superiors in situations that involve both temporary and extended ministry for clerics.

¹³ See USCCB, *Program of Priestly Formation in the United States of America*, 6th ed., June 2022, no. 66; and USCCB, *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States of America*, 2nd ed., 2021.

¹⁴ See also *Proposed Guidelines on the Transfer or Assignment of Clergy and Religious*, adopted in 1993 by the USCCB, the Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM), the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), and the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR).

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Article 15

To ensure diocesan/eparchial bishops and major superiors' ongoing collaboration and mutuality of effort in protecting minors, two representatives of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM) are to serve as consultants to the Committee on the Protection of Children and Young People. At the invitation of the major superiors, the Committee will designate two of its members to consult with its counterpart at CMSM. Diocesan/eparchial bishops (or their delegates) and major superiors (or their delegates) of clerical religious institutes, societies of apostolic life, and autonomous monasteries are to coordinate roles concerning any allegations made against a cleric member of an institute, society, or monastery who is ministering in a diocese/eparchy.

Article 16

Given the extent of the problem of the sexual abuse of minors in our society, we continue to look for opportunities to cooperate with other churches and ecclesial communities, other religious bodies, institutions of learning, and other interested organizations in conducting research. Such research will include the protection of minors and the healing and accompaniment of those who have been harmed by sexual abuse.

Article 17

We commit to working individually in our dioceses/eparchies and together as a Conference, through the appropriate committees, to strengthen our programs for priestly and diaconal formation in both initial and ongoing formation. We commit to fostering trauma-informed pastoral care training for all seminarians. With renewed urgency, we will promote programs of human formation for chastity and celibacy for both seminarians and priests based upon the criteria found in St. John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis* (especially no. 50), our *Program of Priestly Formation in the United States of America* (6th edition), and our 2023 *Guide to*

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Ongoing Formation of Priests, as well as similar appropriate programs for deacons based upon the criteria found in our 2021 *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States* (2nd edition).¹⁵ In the words of Pope Leo XIV, “Victims must be treated with great respect and with an understanding that those who have suffered very deep wounds because of abuse, sometimes carry those wounds for their entire life.”¹⁶ Accordingly, we will continue to assist our seminarians, priests, and deacons in living out their vocation in faithful and integral ways.

Conclusion

In 2026, we can point to significant strides that we in the Catholic Church in the United States have made to address the clergy sexual abuse crisis. As we wrote in 2002, “It is within this context of the essential soundness of the priesthood and of the deep faith of our brothers and sisters in the Church that we know we can meet and resolve this crisis for now and the future.”

We reaffirm that the vast majority of priests and deacons serve their people faithfully and have their esteem and affection. They also have our respect, our support, and our commitment to protect their rights and well-being (CIC, c. 384; CCEO, c. 192 §4).

Essential means of dealing with the crisis include prayer for healing and reconciliation, as well as acts of reparation for the grave offense to God and the deep wound inflicted upon his holy people. Closely connected to prayer and acts of reparation are the call to

¹⁵ See St. John Paul II, *Pastores dabo vobis* (*Apostolic Exhortation on the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day*), March 25, 1992, www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031992_pastores-dabo-vobis.html; USCCB, *Program of Priestly Formation*; USCCB, *Guide to Ongoing Formation of Priests*, June 2023; and USCCB, *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons*, 2021.

¹⁶ Pope Leo XIV, quoted in Salvatore Cernuzio, “Pope Leo Sees Role as One of Building Bridges, Avoiding Polarization,” Vatican News, accessed January 5, 2026, www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2025-09/pope-leo-sees-role-as-building-bridges-avoiding-polarization.html, quoting from a series of interviews the pope did with *Crux of the News* reporter Elise Ann Allen.

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holiness of life and the diocesan/eparchial bishop's care to ensure that he and his priests and deacons avail themselves of proven ways to avoid sin and grow in holiness of life.

With reliance on the grace of God and in a spirit of prayer and penance, we renew the pledges that we made in the 2002 *Charter*:

We pledge most solemnly to one another and to you, God's people, that we will work to our utmost for the protection of children and youth.

We pledge that we will devote to this goal the resources and personnel necessary to accomplish it.

We pledge that we will do our best to ordain to the diaconate and priesthood and put into positions of trust only those who share this commitment to protecting children and youth.

We pledge that we will work toward healing and reconciliation for those sexually abused by clerics. With reconciliation as our goal, we pledge to work toward the spiritual and emotional well-being of others in the Church who have suffered from this crisis, including those who have offended.

Much has been done to honor these pledges. We devoutly pray that God who has begun this good work in us will bring it to fulfillment.

This *Charter* is published for the dioceses/eparchies of the United States. It is to be reviewed again after seven years by the Committee on the Protection of Children and Young People with the advice of the National Review Board. The results of this review are to be presented to the full body of the USCCB for confirmation or for approval if revisions to the *Charter* are proposed. Authoritative interpretations of its provisions are reserved to the USCCB.

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Glossary

Accused	In the context of the <i>Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People</i> , a cleric against whom an allegation of sexual abuse of a minor has been made.
Allegation	In the context of the <i>Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People</i> , an accusation of sexual abuse of a minor by a cleric that has been reported to a civil or ecclesiastical authority.
Audit	An assessment of the implementation of the <i>Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People</i> in the dioceses/eparchies of the United States, which is conducted annually by an independent third-party audit firm.
Child pornography	In canon law, a crime that includes the acquisition, possession, exhibition, and distribution of sexually explicit images of minors by any means, as well as the recruitment of minors to pose in a sexually explicit manner or to participate in similar exhibitions, whether real or simulated (CIC, c. 1398 §1, 2°-3°; CCEO, c. 1453 §5, 2°-3°). US federal law defines child pornography as any visual depiction of sexually explicit conduct involving a minor (someone under eighteen years of age; 18 USC §2256).
Church personnel	A collective term used in this <i>Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People</i> to refer to anyone serving in church ministry, as well as church employees and volunteers.
Civil authority	Any governmental agency granted the authority to enforce the law of the jurisdiction or provide for the safety of the public.
Clergy/clerics	A collective term referring to ordained bishops, priests, and deacons (CIC, c. 207 §1; CCEO, c. 523).
Clerical institute	An institute of consecrated life that assumes the exercise of Holy Orders and is recognized as a clerical institute by the Catholic Church (CIC, c. 588 §2; CCEO, c. 505 §3).
Dicastery	A term used to refer to certain entities of the Roman Curia.

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Diocese	A term used in the Latin Catholic Church to designate a community of the Catholic faithful who are entrusted to the pastoral care and governance of a bishop. Dioceses usually correspond to a defined geographical territory. However, they can be established on a nonterritorial basis (CIC, cc. 369, 372).
Dismissal from clerical state	A church penalty that can be imposed on a cleric, through a judicial or administrative proceeding, for having committed certain crimes. While the man remains in sacred orders theologically, the penalty of dismissal from the clerical state means that the ordained man loses the juridic condition of a cleric. He is generally barred from performing functions connected with the priesthood or the diaconate (except in cases involving the danger of death) or from presenting himself as a priest or deacon (see CIC, c. 292; CCEO, c. 395).
Eparchy	The term used in the Eastern Catholic Churches to designate the community of the Catholic faithful entrusted to the care and governance of a bishop with the cooperation of his priests (CCEO, c. 177 §1). An eparchy is equivalent to a diocese in the Latin Catholic Church.
Good reputation	A fundamental human right protected by the Catholic Church. It applies to the accused, alleged victims/survivors, and witnesses, as well as persons in authority. One's presumed good name cannot be harmed illegitimately by another without a sufficiently serious and lawful reason (CIC, cc. 220, 1717 §2; CCEO, cc. 23, 1468 §2).
Holy See	A term used to refer to the pope and the central government of the Catholic Church (CIC, c. 361; CCEO, c. 48).
Incardinated	Taken from the Latin verb <i>incardinare</i> (meaning to hang on a hinge), this term refers to the bond or attachment between a priest or deacon and a particular diocese, eparchy, institute of consecrated life, society of apostolic life, personal prelature, clerical association, or personal ordinariate. Incardination occurs at the time the man is ordained a deacon (CIC, cc. 265, 266). Church law also provides a process to transfer one's

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incardination to another place following ordination. In the Eastern Catholic Churches, the term is “ascription” (CCEO, cc. 357-358).

Institute of consecrated life	Includes both religious institutes and secular institutes. Members, who may be clerics or nonordained men or women, publicly profess the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience (CIC, c. 573; CCEO, c. 410).
Major superior	The head of an entire institute of consecrated life or society of apostolic life, of a province of an institute or society, or of an autonomous house, as well as his or her vicars (CIC, c. 620; CCEO, c. 418).
Minor	In canon law, a person who is under eighteen years of age. Canon law also recognizes persons who habitually have an imperfect use of reason as being equivalent to minors in the law (CIC, cc. 97, 99, and 1398 §1, 1-3; CCEO, c. 909).
Ordinary	A title used in canon law to refer to diocesan bishops and diocesan or apostolic administrators. Also applies to vicars general and episcopal vicars and to major superiors of clerical religious institutes of pontifical right and clerical societies of apostolic life of pontifical right and their vicars (CIC, c. 134 §1).
Parish	A certain community of the Catholic faithful in a diocese or eparchy whose pastoral care is entrusted to a pastor under the authority of the diocesan or eparchial bishop. Most parishes are formed on a territorial basis, but they may also be formed for national, ethnic, or other reasons; these are commonly known as personal parishes (CIC, cc. 515, 518; CCEO, cc. 279, 280).
Presumption of innocence	For the purposes of the <i>Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People</i> , this term refers to the fundamental principle that a person accused of committing an ecclesiastical (church) offense is considered innocent until proven otherwise. The presumption fosters the protection of individuals from unjust allegations and from illegitimate harm to their good reputation. It also demands that the accused receive fair

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treatment from the time of the allegation and be allowed the full exercise of the right of defense during any subsequent canonical process to resolve the allegation (CIC, c. 1321 §1; CCEO, c. 1414 §1).

Review board	A local board mandated by the <i>Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People</i> that functions as a confidential consultative body serving the diocesan or eparchial bishop. The board is intended to offer advice to the bishop in his assessment of allegations of sexual abuse of minors and in his determination of a cleric's suitability for ministry. Specific requirements for a review board are found in Essential Norms 4 and 5.
Safe environment	A term used to refer to a variety of practices that contribute to preventing child abuse of any kind.
Seal of the Sacrament of Penance	The obligation of strict confidentiality that divine and canon law imposes on a confessor in the Sacrament of Penance, under pain of excommunication, not to betray the penitent by the revelation of his or her identity and the sins confessed (CIC, cc. 983, 1386; CCEO, cc. 733, 1456).
Semblance of truth	The threshold used in canon law that is applied by an ordinary when assessing whether a canonical preliminary investigation can proceed. It is not a finding for or against guilt; rather, it refers to an indication that the facts and circumstances reflected in the information the ordinary has received suggest the possibility that a crime could have been committed. Put negatively, the information seems neither manifestly false nor frivolous (CIC, c. 1717 §1; CCEO, c. 1468 §1).
Seminarian	In the Catholic Church, a male student preparing to be ordained a priest.
Sexual abuse of a minor	In light of the Sixth Commandment of the Decalogue, for purposes of the <i>Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People</i> , this term refers to any contact or interaction between a minor and a member of the clergy that is perpetrated to achieve sexual stimulation or to obtain profit. It encompasses a wide range of behaviors including sexual acts induced by force or threat, exhibitionism, masturbation, inducement to

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prostitution, child pornography, propositions, and even conversations of a sexual nature (see Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Vademecum* “On Certain Points of Procedure in Treating Cases of Sexual Abuse of Minors Committed by Clerics,” I.2).

Society of apostolic life Resembles an institute of consecrated life. Members live in common and can be either lay or clerical. The members pursue the apostolic purpose proper to their society without necessarily professing religious vows (CIC, c. 731; CCEO, c. 572).

Suitability attestation Information provided by a priest’s or deacon’s ecclesiastical superior to a diocesan/eparchial bishop attesting to the cleric’s good standing in the Catholic Church and his ability to exercise ministry, whether permanently or temporarily, in that other diocese or eparchy.