

2024 NRB Address

June 13, 2024

Good morning, your Eminences, your Excellencies, distinguished visitors, and guests. My name is Suzanne Healy. I am the outgoing Chair for the National Review Board.

Each one of us here today, as well as the people in our parishes, schools and other entities are called by God to fulfill the mission of the Church to heal and protect children and young people from sexual abuse by clergy, employees, and volunteers in our church. It is a noble, faith-filled mission. Your commitment to healing and protection has become an intrinsic ministry in our Church. It is no longer responding to a crisis but rather it has become and continues to be engrained in the fabric of our everyday Church culture.

We have much to be proud of. As a result of the commitment you and your brother bishops made in 2002 with the adoption of the *Dallas Charter*, we are creating a culture of safety far beyond what was envisioned nearly 25 years ago.

Results from the 2023 Stonebridge annual audit again show the significant decline in the number of cases being reported from years ago. In 2022 the number of historical cases was 2,704 and this year it was 1,308. The number of new allegations involving current minors abused by clergy this audit year is 17. Certainly, one is too many. For over two decades we have implemented training programs for adults and children. We have systematically implemented background checks for adults. We have instituted robust policies and codes of conduct. We believe these and many other efforts have substantially reduced the potential for abuse today, but we have not yet reached zero.

Why and how did these 17 cases happen this year? Each case can be studied using outside expertise and the principles of High Reliability Organizations. The first principle is preoccupation with failure. Examining these allegations in your dioceses and eparchies can help us identify effective practices in establishing safe environments. Preoccupation with failure can also help to identify the gaps or weaknesses in our policies or in the implementation of policies that allow for such evil events to occur. HRO principles encourage leaders to access and defer to the knowledge and wisdom of subject matter experts. HRO principles examine the near misses and help us prepare for the unexpected. We encourage bishops and dioceses which have not yet taken advantage of the opportunity to be trained in the principles of High Reliability Organizations to contact the Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection to arrange for your training. For those who have been trained, we encourage you to continue examining your diocesan practices until these principles are well integrated into the everyday culture of all parish and church activities.

Research is a very effective tool in evaluating past practices and informs the future evolution of safeguarding. The National Review Board members support continued research from well-established organizations and learning institutions. Two decades ago, you and your brother

bishops commissioned John Jay College of Criminal Justice to conduct two studies, commonly referred to as *Nature and Scope* and *Causes and Context*. At the time these were groundbreaking in terms of self-imposed examination of the depth and breadth of abuse in our church. These studies provided a comparison baseline for the many studies that came after and are often referenced even today. Today, NRB members whole-heartedly support a new proposal by John Jay to look at the credible abuse allegations that have been reported since the last study in 2011. It is important to learn, after decades of safeguarding implementation, how did the recent allegations happen? Are these events that we can prevent in the future? What was the context? Is the solution to be found in ecclesial or societal structures? You again have an opportunity to break ground and establish the foundation for the next evolution in safeguarding. With this new study, you can continue to demonstrate your commitment to the promises made, knowing that you are supported by your brethren around the world as together we resolve to establish healthy and holy communities for all.

The recently released Annual Report contains a wealth of information, identifying strengths and weaknesses. U.S. dioceses and eparchies are to be commended for achieving the goal of 100% participation in the audit data collection this year, the first time since the implementation of the audit in 2004. However, the audit does identify areas of concern that continue to trend. A small number of diocese/eparchies have yet to participate in a live on-site audit which is conducted every three years. Stonebridge noted in its' comments: "until full participation in the on-site audits by all is accomplished, we cannot say that the *Charter* has been fully implemented within the U.S. conference."

Again, this year the audit shows that 70% of dioceses and eparchies conduct their own parish audits. Without auditing parishes for compliance with safe environment policies and practices, we are at risk for possible breakdowns and potential abuse. This is an area to again apply the HRO principle of preoccupation with failure. Do we have the commitment from every parish to consistently implement all safe environment protocols established by the diocese?

Again, we have instances of non-compliance with Article Two of the *Charter*, both in the composition of diocesan review boards and in the regularity of those meetings. Please note, this is a recurrent audit finding, annually. Members of the Bishops' Committee and the NRB have updated the Diocesan Review Board Resource Booklet and have forwarded it to the appropriate USCCB departments for review, including Canonical Affairs. It is our hope that this resource manual will be approved before the end of the year. It contains sound practices that will be helpful for your review boards as they attempt to provide assistance to you, their bishops.

2027 will be the 25years of the *Charter*. NRB members believe a National Day of Commemoration or prayer acknowledging this milestone will honor the commitment to spiritual healing and restorative justice. In anticipation, we must begin now to deliver an event worthy of this momentous occasion.

I mentioned that there is and always will be more work to be done. The NRB members recognize your steadfast mission in honor of God and his people by the establishment of safe environments in our parishes, schools, and other entities. We are also grateful for the support you offer to survivors of abuse from the years past. We must keep the child of today, the child

of tomorrow and especially, the **child of yesterday** at the center of all our decision making. An important part of our mission is to accompany those survivors who have experienced lifelong trauma as a result of the abuse they experienced. Many of you bishops have listened, affirmed, apologized to, learned from, and journeyed beautifully with survivors and their families. You have also taken responsibility in supporting ongoing assistance and accompaniment. You have enlisted the services of many wonderful and gifted professionals as Victims Assistance Coordinators, Safe Environment Coordinators and other Child and Youth Protection ministers. I am in awe of the many examples of compassionate radical accompaniment occurring across the U.S. Again, here we cannot become complacent, and we must remain vigilant in ongoing support of these important ministries and departments. Survivors will continue to teach us and tell us how we can best accompany them. We must listen in a synodal way, expecting to hear in the voices of the survivors the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

The members of the NRB would like to applaud the leadership of the 161 diocese and eparchies who have published lists of clergy with credible allegations of abuse and continue to update them. We believe these lists add to the transparency and accountability of the Church and aid in the healing of those who have been harmed.

The *Charter* is in the process of revision and NRB members along with other important constituents in dioceses and eparchies have participated in this review. We understand your desire for the *Charter* to remain focused on minor abuse by clergy. However, there is a growing expectation and hope that there should also be a similar document to establish a framework for the pastoral response to adult-adult allegations of abuse, along with guidance for the establishment of safeguarding for adults, and clarity on the definition of vulnerable adults. NRB members have recommended since 2018 that there be some process for these allegations as well. The leaders in victims assistance and child and youth protection in your dioceses and eparchies are increasingly receiving adult-adult allegations and responding to them pastorally as best they can. For the past many years, NRB members have been actively engaged in the Child and Youth Protection Catholic Leadership Conference, along with some bishops, where increasingly we have been challenged by your child protection experts who continue to ask, “when are we going to have standards and pastoral care for those adults who have experienced sexual or spiritual abuse as adults, not minors?”. We are aware that this is a complicated matter and that some of you bishops have asked for some framework for these matters as well. It is a fact and public sentiment that abuse hurts at every age. If we don’t respond compassionately in these cases, it diminishes the trust we are working to restore in our Church. The institutional response to these allegations appears to be lacking. Coincidentally, the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors began the process of drafting an updated Guidelines Framework in September 2022. This is in line with the mandate provided in the Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*. This Universal Guideline Framework was adopted in March 2024 by the Pontifical Commission and establishes criteria and indicators for safeguarding. Some of the items coincide with the content of the Dallas *Charter*. However, this document also challenges leaders throughout the Universal Church to go beyond the focus of cleric abuse of minors and to address the issue of safeguarding on a broader scale including adult cases. NRB members recommend you expand your promise to “Protect the Faithful.” Our prayer is that fear does not stand in your way of doing what is right and good and holy. Again,

God calls us to remain vigilant in our care for all His people. Do not be afraid. NOW IS THE TIME!

I have spent the past 17 years committed to the vocation of caring for victims of sexual abuse by persons in our church. And I know that many of you have given much to this ministry. As I end my service as chair of the NRB for our Church, I want to express, from the bottom of my heart, how grateful I am to have had this opportunity to serve and support you.

May God continue to bless all of you, our clergy, our faithful ministers, the survivors, their families, and our children.

Thank you.