

**September
In the Heartland**

Sexual Abuse Crisis in Church

**By Bishop Richard Pates
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The report of the Grand Jury investigation of six dioceses in Pennsylvania on sexual abuse by priests and other Church personnel sent a shock wave through the Catholic Church in the United States in the last few weeks.

The number of perpetrators and victims was very disconcerting. In sum, over a period of seventy years it represented a tragic moral failure on the part of perpetrating clerics and church leadership in “cover-ups.”

Obviously, this type of behavior and the culture in which it existed cannot be condoned. At the same time, words which categorize the behavior as unacceptable are empty unless there is an accompanying commitment to reform.

Our first attention needs to be directed to the victims who suffered this abuse. Heartfelt apologies are extended to them. No effort should be spared to help with the healing process for each one of them. They need to be listened to so that they can convey the pain and suffering they have experienced. Professional counseling and therapy should be provided where called for. Prayer and fasting need to be

undertaken by us seeking God’s intercession in their healing process and demonstrating our solidarity with them.

The Pennsylvania report essentially covered the same time frame regarding the incidence of sexual abuse as did The Boston Globe series at the turn of the millennium. In response to that, the Bishops of the United States in 2002 adopted “The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People” implemented by the accompanying “Essential Norms.”

Bishop Charron before me and I have implemented the Charter in the Diocese of Des Moines as a matter of highest priority. The result is the following provisions:

- 1) Any report of sexual misconduct of a Catholic Church worker is immediately reported to law enforcement followed by an appropriate civil/ecclesial investigation. The person to whom the allegation is directed is suspended pending the outcome of the investigation.
- 2) Any Church worker credibly accused of sexual abuse of a minor is removed from office until the investigation is completed.
- 3) Victims are encouraged to contact the Diocese’s Victim Assistance Advocate, Sam Porter, at 515-286-2015 or email advocate@dmdiocese.org or samporter@polkcountyiowa.gov. He can help victims file a complaint and seek counseling. Victims can also call Polk County Crisis and Advocacy Services at 515-286-3600. The agency will provide advocacy with the diocese regardless of where the victim is living.

- 4) In the last 15 years, the Diocese has been served by an Allegation Review Committee. The present composition is: a police chief, a counselor, a civil judge, a lawyer (who currently serves as chair), a teacher, a permanent deacon and a priest. This body advises the Bishop on all reports of sexual misconduct and diocesan sexual behavior policies.

By way of prevention, the following practices have been initiated:

- 1) A criminal background check is conducted of every individual who undertakes a volunteer, paid or clerical ministry in the diocese. Since 2002, the diocese has completed 18,525 background checks.
- 2) Ministers (volunteer and compensated) need to sign a “Code of Conduct” which they agree to abide by.
- 3) Visiting clergy are required, through their diocese, to submit a “personal statement of suitability.”
- 4) Since 2002, 18,525 people have completed safe environment training. All ministers in the diocese are required to complete monthly “Virtus” readings which highlight dimensions of abuse/boundary issues.
- 5) All youth participating in Church programs are required to participate in education programs alerting them to possible abuses/behaviors.
- 6) There is an annual audit currently conducted by Stonebridge Business Partners. Every third year this exercise is on-site. The other two years it is done in writing. For the 14 years the audit has been conducted, the Diocese of Des Moines has been found to be in compliance with the Charter.

- 7) An independent, third party conducted an audit of all diocesan files of living priests in July, 2014.
- 8) The matter of sexual abuse of minors is governed nationwide by the National Review Board.

Since my coming to Des Moines, ten years ago, one priest has been credibly accused of sexual abuse of a minor (for a situation several years before). He has been laicized and removed from any ministry. Moreover, credible allegations of sexual abuse throughout the country have declined dramatically since the implementation of the Charter. This was acknowledged by the Pennsylvania Report. Actual statistics are available on the website of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops at www.usccb.org

In approximately the same time frame, serious concerns surfaced with regard to Archbishop Theodore McCarrick and sexual abuse allegations brought against him. In this regard, I stand with Cardinal Daniel DiNardo who in a statement on August 27th stated:

On August 1st, I promised that USCCB would exercise the full extent of its authority, and would advocate before those with greater authority, to pursue the many questions surrounding Archbishop McCarrick. On August 16th, I called for an Apostolic Visitation, working in concert with a national lay commission granted independent authority, to seek the truth. Yesterday, I convened our Executive Committee once again, and it reaffirmed the call for a prompt and thorough examination into how the grave moral failings of

a brother bishop could have been tolerated for so long and proven no impediment to his advancement.

I believe that Cardinal DiNardo's action will lead to the truth eventuating in steps to prevent recurrence of such behavior.

Realizing that the Church is not a corporation, a NGO, a private or public institution, or a fraternal organization but a communion of believers deeply committed to solidarity with one another in the Spirit of the Lord Jesus, I asked that prayer and fasting be instituted communally and individually on the Fridays in September. Jesus taught us: "Some demons can only be excised through prayer and penance." I am very grateful to all who have joined in this movement.

While I strongly support effective action to pursue the truth through the Charter and Archbishop DiNardo's initiative, I am also convinced that our prayer and fasting will be extremely efficacious.

I am fully conscious of the upset, embarrassment and pain of so many in our Catholic community. Especially is this true of the vast majority of our faithful clergy, ministers, lay staff and generous volunteers. My wholehearted support, understanding and encouragement are with you at this time.

Without hesitation, we have to be dedicated to widespread, ongoing, and authentic reform. This will require the involvement of many players, especially the laity. If we hold a steady course in reform, will we not be a stronger church when we emerge from this extended crisis? With mutual support, healing, sustainable action forward, combined with solidarity and God's ever present grace, I believe we will.