



A COMMITMENT TO TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

BY BISHOP FELIPE J. ESTÉVEZ

IN AUGUST, I reached out to the faithful of the diocese by a letter which was shared in all our parishes and social media channels. I shared my sorrow and profound regret for the moral crisis that our Church now faces. I also pledged my commitment to greater transparency and accountability in the handling of allegations of sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable adults by clergy and church personnel. This is not business as usual; the leadership of the Church has a lot of work to do to regain your trust and confidence, even if it takes a long time.

Over the last few weeks, I have read and responded to your many letters where your concern and love for the Church are evident. I am grateful to this faith community who joined me in fasting and praying Sept. 14-15 for those who suffered at the hands of clergy, and Church leaders who failed to act responsibly as the Gospel calls us. Many of our priests and deacons also gathered in prayer Sept. 14 at the Shrine of Our Lady of La Leche in St. Augustine and the Santa Fe Shrine of Our Lady of La Leche in St. Madeliene Parish, High Springs. We atoned for all sins, and we pledged to live fully in our commitment to chaste celibacy and selfless service.

Since 1989, the Diocese of St. Augustine has had a system in place for reporting and reviewing suspected abuse by clergy and church personnel, and an extensive program of education and background checks to ensure our children are safe. I am very grateful to Bishop John J. Snyder for his foresight in establishing this program 30 years ago.

It has been very painful to me how those reading the Pennsylvania Grand Jury report, and the secular media coverage that followed assume that our diocese is guilty of the same sins and negligence of leadership.

For many years, we have practiced a zero-tolerance policy to guarantee that allegations are reported to authorities and that anyone found to have committed abuse will be held accountable and permanently removed from ministering in the church.

The diocese has an independent Review Board comprised of lay men and women not employed by the diocese with expertise in law, medicine, psychology, victim advocacy, and criminal investigations to address allegations of abuse. I have asked this Board to be even more proactive in the near future by expanding their scope to include cases of sexual harassment and sexual misconduct with adults by clergy, religious and seminarians.

And while I feel our safe environment program is strong, I promised to take action. Therefore, I have called for an independent

review of our safe environment program by a former law enforcement officer with complete access to all our files.

Once this independent investigation is complete, I will provide a "Report to the Faithful," that will include a comprehensive listing of clergy who have been credibly accused of abuse for the last 30 years.

Many of you have asked how the diocese pays for settlements, counseling fees and other costs associated with sexual abuse? The money comes from an insurance fund. The diocese has never appealed for special funds or conducted the Bishop's Annual Stewardship Appeal to cover these financial commitments.

■ On Sept. 19, the Administrative Committee of the U.S. Catholic Bishops took the following actions:

- The establishment of a third-party reporting system that will receive confidentially, complaints of sexual abuse of minors by a bishop and sexual harassment of or sexual misconduct with adults by a bishop and will direct those complaints to the appropriate ecclesiastical authority and, as required by applicable law, to civil authorities.
- Instructed the USCCB Committee on Canonical Affairs and Church Governance to develop proposals for policies addressing restrictions on bishops who were removed or resigned because of allegations of sexual abuse of minors or sexual harassment of or misconduct with adults, including seminarians and priests.
- Initiated a process of developing a Code of Conduct for bishops regarding the sexual abuse of a minor; sexual harassment of or sexual misconduct with an adult; or negligence in the exercise of his office related to such cases.
- Supported a full investigation into the situation surrounding Archbishop McCarrick, including his alleged assaults on minors, priests, and seminarians, as well as any responses made to those allegations. Such an investigation will rely upon lay experts in relevant fields, such as law enforcement and social services.

I call upon the people of the diocese to contact local law enforcement if you have been abused or you know of abuse. If you are uncomfortable for any reason with the Church providing help, we can connect you with appropriate community services.

As we move forward, I ask for your prayers and continued support. To me, the victims are the ones who need our greatest care, and the concern for their healing and well-being calls for sincere compassion and prayer.

Let us come together as One Faith and One Family in the prayer of Pope Francis in his August 20 letter to the people of God, "May the Holy Spirit grant us the grace of conversion and the interior anointing needed to express before these crimes of abuse our compunction and our resolve courageously to combat them."

I believe in the victory of the Cross where merciful love and bold acts of forgiveness bring true light that makes possible a peaceful heart, a joyful life that only Jesus Christ can provide to us. 🙏