



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

DIOCESE OF SCRANTON
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Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In early March of this year, the Pennsylvania Attorney General released a report from a Statewide Investigating Grand Jury regarding sexual abuse by clergy in the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown. The report detailed horrendous acts of child sexual abuse and how church officials in that diocese and local civil officials did not respond adequately when they had the opportunity and duty to do so.

The abuse of children is one of the darkest chapters in the life of the Church and in our world. We know, unfortunately, that child abuse occurs throughout society and is far too prevalent. To those of us who profess our faith in God, it is particularly disturbing when it is perpetrated by a member of the Church.

In addition to the terrible harm done to survivors and their families, it also tears at the very fabric of our Church, even causing some to question the worthiness of the Church as an institution. At the very least, all of us are disgusted and saddened by these sinful, inexcusable acts.

This most recent report involving a diocese in our own state serves as a painful step in addressing the evils of child sexual abuse and the harm inflicted by those who attempt to cover up such inappropriate behavior. Hopefully, this report will also serve to promote the healing of survivors and fortify the efforts of all those committed to bringing such abhorrent behavior to an end.

I want to assure you that our commitment to the well-being of all children has been and will continue to be unwavering. Over the past 14 years, the Diocese of Scranton and dioceses throughout the United States have implemented policies to ensure accountability to victims and to keep children safe from any type of abuse. If the Diocese learns of an incident of abuse, it responds swiftly through the provisions of church and civil law and fully cooperates with civil authorities so that justice is served.

The Diocese of Scranton maintains a zero tolerance policy for clergy, lay employees and volunteers who engage in misconduct with minors and takes immediate action when an accusation is made. Any allegation of abuse is reported immediately to law enforcement and any substantiated allegation against a member of the clergy results in immediate and permanent removal from ministry.

The Diocese retains a Victim Assistance Coordinator who coordinates assistance for the immediate pastoral care of persons who claim to have been sexually abused as a minor by a member of the clergy. Each year this program offers substantial support to survivors and their families by underwriting expenses related to counseling, medication and other forms of care.

All employees in parishes, schools and Diocesan run facilities - clergy, religious and laity - as well as volunteers, including teachers and coaches, must have up-to-date criminal background and child abuse clearances. In addition, all employees and volunteers receive training on the nature of child sexual abuse and how a parish/school community can work together proactively to prevent it. Since 2003, the total number of adults trained by the Diocese now stands at 26,000. The Diocese has also implemented a safe environment program for students in grades K-12 in Catholic schools and parish religious education programs to teach

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them how to recognize and avoid situations that could lead to sexual abuse. It also encourages communication between children and their parents so that potentially dangerous situations and incidents are reported promptly.

Our website (www.dioceseofscranton.org) contains comprehensive information about our Child Protection/Safe Environment policies and procedures. In every edition of *The Catholic Light*, we publish a notice about reporting sexual abuse of a minor. We also urge anyone to report incidents of child abuse immediately to the 24-hour PA Child Abuse Hot Line. The toll-free number is 1-800-932-0313.

The goal of these endeavors is to create safe environments for children through education and prevention programs, establishing policies that clearly set standards of behavior regarding contact with minors, and offering support to those who have suffered abuse so that they and their families can experience healing. This is not simply a matter of policy or legal requirements, it is our solemn moral obligation and we take it seriously.

This month, we again observe Child Abuse Prevention Month. While it is fitting that a month is dedicated to this special cause, it is also important to remember that vigilance must be maintained every single day - by all of us. We remain firmly committed to doing everything we can to prevent abuse within our Church, parishes, school communities, and Diocesan run facilities. Most importantly, we are resolved to supporting victims with our compassion and assistance in order to help them achieve healing.

To that end, I ask you to join me in praying first of all for all survivors of abuse. Their suffering is beyond imagining.

I also ask you to pray for dedicated clergy and religious throughout the Church and in our Diocese. Finally, please try to find it within your hearts to pray for the perpetrators of such horrendous acts. Forgiveness and reconciliation, as difficult and demanding as they may be, are the cornerstones of our faith.

Despite the failings of our human nature and the evil that exists in our world, let us not despair. As a People of God, we are a people of hope. Continuing to celebrate Easter and the boundless love and grace offered to us by the Risen Jesus, may we take comfort in his words which assure us, "I am with you always."

Faithfully yours in Christ,

† *Joseph C. Bambera*

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