

Letter from Cardinal Blase J. Cupich to the People of the Archdiocese of Chicago in Response to the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report

August 17, 2018

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Anger, shock, grief, shame. What other words can we summon to describe the experience of learning about the devastating revelations of sexual abuse — and the failures of bishops to safeguard the children entrusted to their care — published in the Pennsylvania grand jury report, released Tuesday? This catalogue of horrors comes on the heels of news accounts of deeply disturbing sexual-abuse and harassment allegations against Archbishop Theodore McCarrick, who recently resigned from the College of Cardinals. And yet whatever words we may use to describe the anguish of reading about these heinous acts, they can never capture the reality of suffering endured by victims of sexual abuse, suffering compounded by the woeful responses of bishops who failed to protect the people they were ordained to serve. As the Holy See put it in its August 16 statement on the grand jury report: “The church must learn hard lessons from its past, and there should be accountability for both abusers and those who permitted abuse to occur.”

I know that many of you are asking: How could this be happening again? Didn't the U.S. bishops address this crisis sixteen years ago when they met in Dallas? What are they doing now, and why should we trust that this time they will do the right thing?

These are precisely the questions that ought to be asked. As a former chair of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee for the Protection of Children and Young People, I have asked them myself. And sorrow, disgust, outrage — these are righteous feelings, the stirrings of the conscience of a people scandalized by the terrible reality that too many of the men who promised to protect their children, and strengthen their faith, have been responsible for wounding both.

We know this not only because of the admirable work of the many members of the news media who played an essential role in bringing this crisis into the light. Now, we have been made to face these scandals first and foremost by the courage of victim-survivors — the men and women who found the strength, even when doing so meant suffering again unimaginable pain, to come forward and seek justice from an institution that grievously failed them.

What are we bishops doing now to ensure that those failures are not repeated? Today, USCCB President Cardinal Daniel DiNardo announced on behalf of all the bishops that our conference will launch a thorough investigation of the allegations against Archbishop McCarrick; that it will establish new ways in which people can report complaints against bishops; and that it will advocate for more effective resolution of such allegations. The USCCB will invite the Holy See to investigate the McCarrick case, in concert with a predominantly lay group of experts.

The bishops will also update our 2002 “Statement of Episcopal Commitment” by which the bishops pledged to follow a procedure for reporting allegations of sexual abuse of minors by a bishop.

This document needs revision to clarify how victims can report abuse of minors or other misconduct by bishops, as well as develop third-party reporting systems, many of which are already being looked at today. Of course, bishops are not exempt from following standards of behavior. Our own Cardinal Joseph Bernardin provided a strong example, when he chose to step aside after he was accused of abuse — a charge that was eventually retracted.

The USCCB will also press for procedures that will make it easier to resolve complaints against bishops in a timely, fair, and transparent manner.

As Cardinal DiNardo explained, all this will be conducted with “proper independence, sufficient authority, and substantial leadership by laity.” This call for lay oversight of the investigation, as much as the scandal itself, shows the need for systemic change in the way we order church life. The clericalist mindset, responsible for so much of the scandal, must be purged from church life. As Pope Francis has urged, we need to remember that it is our baptism that unites us. We as a church must reflect more deeply on what we share in common, rather than what distinguishes us.

The abuses contained in the Pennsylvania grand jury report are, as you know, appallingly familiar. And while it is true that the vast majority of abuses contained in that report occurred decades ago, that is of no comfort to victims, nor should it be to any of us. We cannot say this enough: the abuses should never have happened, and no one should have acted in ways that enabled them. This is why, following the 2002 wave of scandals, the USCCB adopted policies designed to protect young people from abusers. We instituted a zero-tolerance policy which holds that even one instance of child sexual abuse would bar someone from the priesthood forever. The Archdiocese of Chicago has implemented these policies and even done more.

1. We established an independent lay-majority review board to consider allegations against clergy and make recommendations to the bishops.
2. We refer all allegations of abuse to civil authorities.
3. We require diocesan employees and volunteers to undergo background checks.
4. We mandate that all diocesan employees and volunteers undergo safe-environment training to help them identify predatory behavior and understand avenues of reporting. And we required that children be taught how to recognize, resist and report abuse.
5. We undergo an annual audit to measure compliance with these policies, which every year has found the Archdiocese of Chicago compliant.

Since 2002, hundreds of thousands of our people in dioceses across the United States have undergone safe-environment training. In many ways we can say that the policies of the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, which established procedures for addressing allegations of sexual abuse of minors by clergy, have been successful. According to the Pennsylvania grand jury report, for example, just two of the 300 priests named in the text were accused within the past decade, and both were reported to civil authorities. This excuses nothing,

and we can never become complacent about our responsibility to protect children and adults from abuse and harassment, but it does say something about the effects of our post-2002 policies.

Here in the Archdiocese of Chicago, we have been following procedures that were first established by Cardinal Bernardin in 1992, following revelations of clergy abuse that came to light during that period. In addition to what the Charter calls for, we offer payment for counseling or other assistance to anyone who comes to us with allegations even before attempting to establish the credibility of the claim. After any civil investigation has concluded, we conduct our own inquiry into allegations against priests, and our majority-lay review board considers the case and makes a recommendation to me about whether the accused should remain in ministry. One of the most important things Cardinal Bernardin did was to establish a regular meeting of everyone who might be called in to consider a case of sexual abuse, whether it involves a minor or an adult. So, to this day, representatives from across the relevant pastoral center offices regularly meet with me to advise me on cases that arise and ways to strengthen our commitments.

Of course, no set of procedures is perfect. As the grand jury report illustrates, they are subject to the strengths and weaknesses of those entrusted to carry them out. Closed systems always tend toward self-protection; it is only when we create systems of accountability that we let in purifying light. That's what our practices are designed to do. They exist because we as a church have a grave responsibility to ensure the safety of our people. That is why I encourage anyone who has been victimized to contact our Office of Protection of Children and Youth at 800.994.6200 or protect.archchicago.org.

Anger, shock, grief, shame. There is one other word that we bishops must summon: resolve. We must resolve to face our failures and hold each other accountable. We must resolve to be clear-eyed about what we have done, what we have failed to do, and what remains to be done. We must resolve to live in the light of humility, of repentance, of honesty — the light of Christ. As your bishop, I pledge to continue holding firm to that resolve. And I ask for you to pray for all victims of abuse. I also invite you to review what I have written here and make suggestions for improving our safe-environment standards, ever heeding the Second Vatican Council's "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," which called on the laity, "by reason of the knowledge, competence or outstanding ability which they may enjoy ... to express their opinion on those things which concern the good of the church."

Sincerely yours in Christ,
Cardinal Blase J. Cupich
Archbishop of Chicago