

STATEMENT ON SEXUAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN

by

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Recent years have seen an alarming increase in reported cases of the sexual abuse of children. This is a profound tragedy for all involved, but it is also more than that. Because of the lasting impact of such incidents on the victims, child molestation constitutes a direct threat to the future well being and stability of our society. As such, it must be a matter of the gravest concern to all persons of good will. It is, of course, a particular concern for both secular and religious organizations involved with the care and education of children. All such organizations must respond to this problem through training, education and, where needed, effective action.

The sexual abuse of children often involves a complex disorder known as pedophilia. It affects both men and women without regard to whether they are married, single or celibate. Tragically it has occurred in persons who are leaders of the community and others who have been placed in positions of great trust. As the clinical and other dimensions of pedophilia become better understood, society's ability to deal capably with the problem grows. For their part, the Roman Catholic Bishops of the United States are deeply committed to addressing such incidents positively, to making strong efforts to prevent child abuse, to repairing whatever damage has been done, and to bringing the healing ministry of the Church to bear wherever possible.

As public attention began to be more focused on child abuse generally and pedophilia particularly, the United States Catholic Conference has taken strong and positive steps to educate, advise and guide. Because medical evidence shows that most offenders were themselves victims of abuse as children, the Conference's efforts have been, and will continue to be, directed towards assisting those involved to break that cycle here and now, through positive programs of prevention and education. The U.S.C.C. has already undertaken programs for the education of Bishops and their advisors, health officials, diocesan administrators, attorneys and others. The Bishops took up the problem of pedophilia at a plenary session in Collegeville, Minnesota some three years ago. The program included presentations of the clinical, legal and pastoral aspects of the problem. This effort has been supplemented and supported by involvement of diocesan officials in 1985, 1986 and 1987, with further discussion by the Bishops in their 1987 plenary session. In part, because of these efforts and because of the commitment of individual dioceses to the care of Catholic families

and children, affirmative activities on the local level have been and are being successfully conducted. These include the education of diocesan personnel involved with children on the prevention of child abuse; development of diocesan personnel policies and guidelines governing the reporting of instances of abuse and the diocese's response to specific complaints, including suspension from employment and from active ministry wherever appropriate; sensitive awareness to the pastoral implications for the accused and the victim; and commitment of the diocese to heal the victims and their families, rehabilitate the offender, and reconcile all involved in the ministry of the Church. Dioceses undertake these efforts as tangible signs of their commitment to the care and well-being of the individuals involved, especially children.

Concerning the Conference's activities, the U.S.C.C. is not a national governing board for the Church in the United States. Under both Church law and civil law, each diocese is separate and independent from every other diocese, and the Conference may not direct that actions be undertaken by a diocese or other Church-related institution. However, the Conference provides a forum for general guidance and consultation, and facilitates discussion and communication among the individuals and groups dealing with the problem. These efforts have principally involved the U.S.C.C. Office of General Counsel in providing confidential advice to diocesan attorneys and officials, when and if requested. The Conference, however, is not consulted in every case and records in many cases are closed by the courts to protect, quite properly, the privacy of the victim, the accused and other persons involved. At the same time, the Conference does not pass judgment on the actions taken in individual cases, which involve specific and often complicated facts and the application of differing state law. Finally, the U.S.C.C. has no reliable estimate for either the numbers of cases or persons involved, other than what is reported. Even one report, however, is cause for concern because it indicates that a child has been victimized.

Pedophilia is neither a Church nor a clerical problem exclusively, but one affecting religious and secular groups alike. The Conference joins its own efforts with those of other public and private organizations that educate and care for children. All share a common commitment to prevent instances of child abuse whenever possible, and to restore those who suffer from pedophilia and their victims to health. The men and women who lead the many and varied Church organizations and institutions are fully committed to the well-being and prosperity of our nation's children.