

June 1992

Statement of Archbishop Pilarczyk,
President of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops,
on the Sexual Abuse of Children

No single pastoral question is more painful to us as bishops than the situation of sexual abuse where the offender is a member of the clergy or a person in the employ of the church and the offended is a child.

The sexual abuse of a child constitutes reprehensible conduct directed at a most vulnerable member of our society. This disordered behavior cuts across all the lines in our society. The sexual abuse of children knows no class, race, social, income, religious, or occupational distinctions among offenders. It is apparently unaffected by sexual orientation or gender, or whether the person is married or celibate. The long-term effects that such behavior can have on the life and future of a child must not be underestimated. Across our society, the number of reported cases is on the increase; research shows that perhaps as many as one out of every four girls and one out of every ten boys is sexually abused before they reach their eighteenth birthday. Wherever and however it occurs, the behavior is wrong and deserves condemnation.

Pastoral experience, illuminated by increasing medical and sociological knowledge about the roots of this disordered behavior, has helped us see areas in which the action of the Church and its leadership can improve. Now we know -- as does most of society along with us -- that sexual abuse is caused by a disorder (in some cases, an addiction) for which treatment is essential. Sometimes the therapy may be successful; sometimes

it is not. We realize we must seek sound medical advice as we make responsible pastoral judgments. The protection of the child is and will continue to be our first concern.

In the matter of priests and sexual abuse, undoubtedly mistakes have been made in the past. Until recently, few in society and the Church understood the problem well. People tended to treat sexual abuse as they did alcoholism -- as a moral fault for which repentance and a change of scene would result in a change of behavior. Far more aggressive steps are needed to protect the innocent, treat the perpetrator, and safeguard our children.

Where lack of understanding and mistakes have added to the pain and hurt of victims and their families, they deserve an apology and we do apologize. However, regret, sadness, apology -- all appropriate -- are not enough. Action is what matters most. For the last several years, our conference and its individual bishops have worked to understand the problem and to combat and correct it. On five occasions at national meetings, we have discussed this issue, -- how to treat it and, most of all, how to prevent it. In 1988 in a statement by our General Counsel and again in 1989 in a statement by our Administrative Board, the working policy on the national level has been made clear. For the last five years, strongly and consistently, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops has recommended the following course of action to our 188 dioceses:

- * Respond promptly to all allegations of abuse where there is reasonable belief that the incident has occurred.
- * If such an allegation is supported by sufficient evidence, relieve the alleged offender promptly of his ministerial duties and refer him for appropriate medical evaluation and intervention.
- * Comply with the obligations of civil law as regards reporting of the incident and cooperating with the investigation.
- * Reach out to the victims and their families and communicate our sincere commitment to their spiritual and emotional well-being.
- * Within the confines of respect for the privacy of the individuals involved, deal as openly as possible with members of the community about this incident.

Our national episcopal conference is not a governing body and it cannot pass rules and regulations which bind the actions of its members outside of a limited number of areas delegated to it by the universal law of the Church. Nonetheless, dioceses across the nation have taken the above guidance to heart and many have drafted their own written policies.

These steps have been taken and policies adopted, notwithstanding the fact that such sexual misconduct has involved relatively few priests measured against 53,000 priests in our country. Yet we also recognize that one case of a priest sexually abusing

one child is one too many. The effects of such behavior are truly tragic. As our knowledge of this disordered behavior has grown and with the help of medical and other experts, we have tried to refine our policies while redoubling our commitment to prompt action, as well as healing and reconciliation.

As we conclude yet one more session on this sad and tragic topic, we wish to assure our sisters and brothers that our working policy in this regard will be carried out. We commit our pastoral energy to attempt to break this cycle of abuse. We shall continue to engage the resources of our community -- seeking the help of medical authorities, pastoral experts, parents and others. We commit ourselves to more effective diocesan policies and practices with each additional insight we receive.

Alone we cannot solve a problem which runs across society. But we can play a part in the solution, and we shall.