



DIOCESE
OF ST. PETERSBURG
Office Of The Bishop

May 28, 2011

Dear Sisters and Brothers in the Risen Lord:

In May 2006, I issued a letter to the people of the Diocese of St. Petersburg regarding what we were going to do to protect children and vulnerable adults. *(That letter is available on the diocesan webpage under the Safe Environment Program Office).* Given the stories that have come out internationally and nationally regarding sexual misconduct by priests and others, I wanted to issue an updated report at this time. The original letter issued in May 2006 reflected a commitment of our Church to protect children and vulnerable adults. In this report, I will outline what has happened since my arrival in 1996 and hopefully, in the spirit of transparency, give you specific information regarding our Diocese and the issues we have faced in the past.

It should be understood first and foremost that, whenever an allegation is made against a priest and it is determined to be credible, he is removed from priestly ministry. Church law has the equivalent of a civil Statute of Limitations, which can prevent me from seeking laicization for a priest. However, I take every reasonable step to be sure he is out of priestly ministry, and I will continue to do so whenever an allegation is deemed credible.

To date, we have had 59 credible instances of sexual misconduct with a minor involving 8 priests of the Diocese *(49 instances against two priests alone)* and 10 credible instances involving 4 priests, not of this Diocese, but who were in ministry within our Diocese at the time. Since its beginning in 1968, our Diocese has had over 5,000 priests serve the people of God. We have had 7 instances of sexual misconduct with a minor involving 3 lay persons serving in ministry. The names of our diocesan clergy who have had credible allegations of sexual misconduct with a minor raised against them are published on the diocesan webpage under the Safe Environment Program Office. This information will continue to be available on our diocesan webpage. I continue to pray for the victims of priests and others who abused their trust and violated children.

The most important thing I can do as your Bishop is to take steps to ensure that we, as the Church here in the Diocese of St. Petersburg, do everything reasonably possible to protect our children and vulnerable adults. The following actions have been and are being taken to achieve that result:

- The **Safe Environment Program** office is established in our Diocese and conducts programs throughout the Diocese on a continual basis. This office ensures that we meet our commitment that we have made to you in the past.
- We have established a **Victim Assistance Ministry**. We continue to have victims come forward who were harmed in the past, and we continue to follow our policy for the protection of children and vulnerable adults. I am sure that there still remain those who have been harmed, and I encourage them to come forward to law enforcement and/or our Lay Victim Assistance Minister by calling 1.866.407.4505. We remain committed to listening to them and to assisting them in their healing process. When we do receive a allegation, our Lay Victim Assistance Minister offers immediate pastoral care while a preliminary investigation is conducted.
- We have established a comprehensive **Screening Process**. All employees, priests and deacons, and any individual who serves in a ministry and comes into contact with youth and vulnerable adults must be screened. This screening process is redone every five years. I and many of our priests who were screened when we began this program have just completed rescreening and recertification in our Safe Environment Program, including a combined FBI/Florida Department of Law Enforcement background check. The screening process is outlined on the diocesan webpage. We have screened over 18,000 people in the last five years. This includes over 300 priests who serve in active ministry in our Diocese, all of whom have been screened and recertified. Our Diocese, including our parishes and schools, has

spent nearly \$1,000,000 in the last five years to make sure this screening is comprehensive and our children and vulnerable adults are protected.

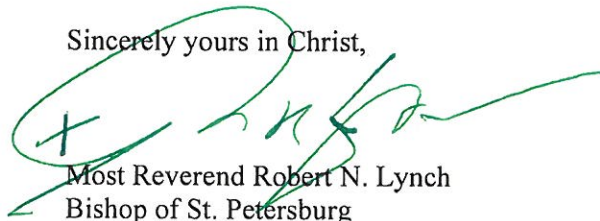
- The **Diocesan Review Board** reviews all accusations of sexual misconduct with a minor. (*Complete description of this Board is under Safe Environment on the diocesan webpage*). The first thing we do is report any accusation to the appropriate law enforcement/State Attorney's Office. To date, I have accepted the recommendation of the Diocesan Review Board in every instance. For all instances in which the allegations are deemed to be credible, the individual is permanently removed from ministry. No diocesan priest is serving in ministry within our Diocese against whom an allegation has been deemed credible.
- A consistent **Investigation Process** is established and followed. The Diocese uses an outside investigator, who is a former FBI agent, and the results of the investigation are then presented to our Diocesan Review Board. When an allegation is deemed credible, our response is to offer pastoral care and assistance and to assist in the healing process. We have been able to achieve reasonable settlements, not for legal reasons, but because the Church should offer care and assistance for those who have been harmed by someone serving in the ministry.

There is a cost above and beyond the significant physical and emotional impact on the victims and their families. Over the past five years, the Diocese has expended \$1,760,000 for settlements, and an additional \$273,000 for counseling assistance to those who have been harmed as minors, as well as \$123,000 in legal fees and costs. Since 1990, the total expended for settlements has been \$4,715,000. Approximately 20% of this has been covered by insurance. The remainder has been withdrawn from insurance reserves of the Diocese. We have never appealed for special funds or conducted our Annual Pastoral Appeal to cover these financial commitments.

I think you know that, as your Bishop, this is a very difficult report for me to issue because it reopens wounds caused by those who have hurt our children. However, I feel that being open and honest with you is necessary. There are no real positives in this situation, but I do take some comfort in a number of things. First, the number of accusations we have received alleging sexual misconduct for the abuse of minors has diminished. Nearly all the claims we have received are more than 20 years old. Our policies for protecting children and vulnerable adults began in 1996 and are updated to reflect best practice. The lack of any recent incident is a clear indication that some of the actions we are taking are working to provide a safe environment for our children. Second, we have never received a complaint regarding a vulnerable adult being abused. Finally, I want you to know that I have the full support of all our priests in making sure our Diocese is safe for children and vulnerable adults. I know even just one instance of abuse is one too many. At some point, fallible Bishops and fallible Review Boards must sit in judgment of an allegation brought against a member of our family. I can assure you that we follow the requirements of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*. The Diocese of St. Petersburg has been found to be in compliance after each of the five USCCB mandated audits conducted by their outside auditors.

My heart continues to go out to the victims of priests and others who have abused their trust. No amount of money, counseling or emotional and spiritual support can right this terrible wrong. In my talks with victims, the one promise which seems to bring the most and sometimes the only comfort is that the Church listens and continues to act in such a manner to do our best to prevent it from happening again. While there have been so many good priests serving our Diocese throughout the years I, as Bishop, and my brother priests, regret that twelve of our number have had credible instances of sexual misconduct with a minor. I want to close my report by emphasizing that we should continue to focus on what steps we need to take to continue preventing any future harm. As a Church, we are deeply committed to this goal.

Sincerely yours in Christ,



Most Reverend Robert N. Lynch
Bishop of St. Petersburg