

Doing All We Can To Safeguard Children

*By The Most Reverend John J. Myers
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When I first learned several weeks ago that Fr. Michael Fugee may have violated a lifetime ban on ministry to minors, I immediately ordered an outside law firm to conduct a full and thorough investigation of the matter. I told the firm I wanted to know what happened and why. I said I not only wanted to know if there was any wrongdoing, but that if there was wrongdoing and it rose to the point that authorities should be notified, I wanted them notified as well.

The investigation uncovered certain operational vulnerabilities in our own systems. We found that the strong protocols presently in place were not always observed.

The seriousness of the situation with Fr. Fugee required a thoughtful and effective response. Appointing a new Vicar General will be just one step in a comprehensive plan to review, and where necessary, strengthen our internal protocols and ensure we are doing everything we can to safeguard the children of our community.

So, effective immediately, the Vicar General, Msgr. John E. Doran, has resigned his post and will no longer hold a leadership position with the Archdiocese. As a result of operational failures, both Msgr. Doran and I felt that the Archdiocese would be best served by his stepping down as Vicar General. This action clears the way for making more effective changes in our monitoring function. I am transferring that function to the Office of the Judicial Vicar of the Archdiocese.

Every one of the prosecutors with whom we deal – in Bergen, Essex, Hudson, and Union Counties – knows that the Archdiocese reports accusations as soon as we receive them.

We want our procedures to be among the strictest in the entire Catholic Church. This has been one of my priorities since becoming Archbishop in 2001 and that will not change. In fact, the Archdiocese has an exemplary record of addressing allegations against our clergy. During my tenure I have personally removed 19 priests for substantiated allegations.

Since 2002, we have told those who bring us any accusations, credible or otherwise, that we will report them to law enforcement and we encourage them to do the same. We provide accusers with the prosecutor's phone number, in writing. If you visit our website – www.rcan.org – click on the tab "To Report Abuse" and you'll find those numbers. We also have strong policies and procedures in place to ensure that our very strict protocols are followed. Regrettably however, Fr. Fugee's situation has demonstrated that our system was not perfect. Accordingly we must identify the flaws and fix them. That is what I am committed to doing.

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We are starting by reviewing and, as appropriate, strengthening our procedures and protocols. It is my belief that we must not simply meet accepted guidelines but consistently go above and beyond them. That's why we are introducing several changes and new initiatives, all of which share the same goal – to ensure clarity and diligence in serving our community.

As part of this process, I will be appointing a new special advisor to our Archdiocesan Review Board. Additionally, I have committed to provide more resources to the Review Board, an independent group of expert, and mainly lay, volunteers who help the Archdiocese and myself investigate allegations of clergy sexual misconduct involving minors and recommend any action under Church law.

I am also expanding resources for training programs within the Archdiocese. Since 2000, the Newark Archdiocese has trained some 45,000 clergy, Religious and lay staff and volunteers in how to recognize signs of abuse and report them.

We have also built annual safety training into the curriculum for each of the more than 31,000 students in our Catholic elementary and secondary schools. Through lectures, videos, online programs and other materials, students learn how to identify and report inappropriate conduct and behavior. Most recently, we added approximately 350 trained individuals at the parish and school level to ensure that all safe environment protocols are implemented and followed. The Archdiocese will continue these training programs and increase efforts at every level to ensure our children are protected.

Lastly, we have consistently reminded our priests and deacons that they must receive written permission to conduct ministry in other dioceses or face the consequences for not doing so. We have made it clear that violation of our tenets will not be tolerated.

All of these measures are geared toward safeguarding the members of our parishes and community. You can be sure we will continue to expand our efforts.

We are not perfect. But people who suggest we have not taken seriously the oversight of our clergy and do not put the security and safety of our families and parishioners, especially our children, at the forefront of our ministry are just plain wrong.

This is among the most sacred responsibilities that I share with the other honorable, dedicated clergy within our Archdiocese.