

Letter to the Archbishop of St. Paul – Minneapolis, the Most Reverend John Nienstedt and to the local Church

“To the extent of their knowledge, competence or authority, the laity are entitled and sometimes duty-bound to express their opinion on matters which concern the good of the Church” (Vatican Council II, “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church”, *Lumen Gentium*, par. 37).

The people of God rightly expect bishops to be good stewards of the Lord’s household. As Pope Francis has said, “The bishop, as a witness of Christ, is not isolated, but *with* the Church . . . The episcopate is not for the bishop himself, but for the Church, for the flock, and for others” (Address to the Congregation for the Bishops, February 27, 2014). Recent events have shown how badly the pastoral leadership of the Archdiocese has failed to meet those expectations. We refer not only to the multi-faceted sexual abuse scandal itself but also to the manner in which these scandals have been handled.

The harm done affects first of all the victims themselves. But it touches the lives of all of us as members of the Church, including our efforts as professional theologians to represent the Catholic faith and the Catholic intellectual tradition in an honest and credible way to our students, their parents, our alumni, and our colleagues and friends. As theologians and educators, we offer proposals that may open a path toward recovery from the pastoral breakdown we are witnessing. We do so reluctantly and wish to emphasize that we remain committed to working and praying for the good of the whole archdiocese, including its pastoral leadership. We also want to recognize the criticisms and insights already offered by several of our women colleagues in their letter published on July 25, 2014.

Leave the legal talk to the lawyers; bring pastoral talk to the people. The Archdiocese is in a spiritual crisis as well as a legal crisis. The resolution of the legal actions now underway will not undo the spiritual damage. While we support the rights of the victims of sexual crimes to justice and hope that resolutions of the lawsuits will offer appropriate restitution that leads to their healing, we know that no legal decision will heal the damage done to the Body of Christ. A process of spiritual healing could begin within an appropriate liturgical setting and with you taking the initiative. Consider using the Rite of Reconciliation as a model for how this might be done in various places around the Archdiocese. Think about the example set by Pope St. John Paul II’s millennial apology for the failings of the Church. We believe that the people of the Archdiocese would welcome such gestures towards reconciliation.

Re-introduce yourself to the people and parishes that are our Archdiocese. Trust within the Church and between the Church and the local community has been badly broken. Indeed, the office of Archbishop itself has been gravely damaged by the facts exposed in the lawsuits. Announcing the creation of another committee or supervisory body can only go partway towards restoring that trust. We believe that restoring a trust worthy of your office will only come fully through your personal commitment to developing a more open and immediate relationship with people around the Archdiocese. You need to make a fresh effort to listen to

them and to get to know them better – people from all walks of life, those who are already receptive to you and those who may not be.

Engage lay people in the important work of the Archdiocese. The current situation will not be improved without greater lay involvement in the Archdiocese. Lay people must be placed in positions of responsibility in priestly formation, in the governance of the Archdiocese, and especially in the management of the scandal. The harsh light now being shone on the inner governance of the Archdiocese makes clear that the problems are not merely personal. They are systemic, the product of a long-standing and deeply entrenched clericalism that does not have to be the corollary of the ordained priestly ministry.

We believe that without such public steps the pastoral state of the archdiocese is not sustainable. The Archdiocese of St. Paul-Minneapolis has had a distinguished place in the history of the Catholic Church in the United States. The current crisis is a grave blot on that history. Legal action alone will not remove it.

St. Paul, MN

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Signed by the following tenured members of the Theology Department of the University of St. Thomas:

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