

Statement by the Catholic Bishops of New Jersey on What the Catholic Church has done and continues to do to Protect Children

March 4, 2019

Much attention has been given to the meeting of bishops in Rome last month called by Pope Francis to address a morally reprehensible, shameful and horrific crime – the sexual abuse of children.

For two decades, the Roman Catholic Church in New Jersey has taken firm action to address this issue, and we welcome the efforts of the Holy Father to bring the rest of the world up to our high standards for keeping our teaching, worship, and ministry spaces safe for everyone, especially children. We maintain a policy of zero tolerance. That means that any cleric who has abused even one child is to be permanently barred from engaging in any act of public ministry.

Each diocese has comprehensive policies in place to respond to and to prevent the sexual abuse of minors. These safety policies and practices are regularly verified by an external audit of each diocese. Over the last ten years, our dioceses have trained more than 3.1 million adults, children, employees, clergy and volunteers to detect and prevent abuse. Over the past fifteen years, the dioceses have completed some 385,000 criminal background checks of all clergy, staff and volunteers who have regular contact with minors.

All of our dioceses are committed to assisting victims of abuse whenever and however we can. Each diocese has a Victim Assistance Coordinator, who facilitates the provision of counseling and other professional assistance to help those who have been abused. All victims have the opportunity to meet with the bishop in order to facilitate healing.

In 2002, the dioceses entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Attorney General and all 21 County Prosecutors to facilitate the immediate intervention of law enforcement whenever there is any allegation that a minor is being sexually abused. Since 2002, the dioceses have reported all allegations of abuse to public authorities, whether the person bringing the complaint is now an adult, no matter how long ago the abuse is alleged to have occurred, and whether or not the accused is living or deceased.

The New Jersey Division of Criminal Justice in a December 2, 2002 press release described the MOU as: “The most comprehensive and precise agreement of its kind in the nation.”

That December 2, 2001 press release by the Division of Criminal Justice also said that the MOU:

“... accomplished the overriding goal of protecting victims of sexual offenses and other vulnerable members of society, while ensuring that prosecutors be provided with all relevant information regarding allegations of sexual assault – whether past, present or future.”

In September 2018, our dioceses welcomed Attorney General Gurbir S. Grewal’s establishment of a special task force to investigate allegations of sexual abuse by members of the clergy in New Jersey. All of our dioceses are cooperating fully with the investigation.

In November 2018, our dioceses announced a Victims Compensation Program to provide victims with an alternative to litigation providing victims **a speedy, transparent and non-adversarial process to resolve their claims with a significantly lower level of proof and corroboration than required in a court of law.**

The program administrators, Kenneth R. Feinberg and Camille S. Biros (noted victims’ compensation experts) will act independently and have complete discretion in evaluating and compensating individual claims. Church officials will have no authority to challenge the decisions reached by the Administrators.

This compensation program will expand on the current arrangement through which the five dioceses over the last decade have provided some \$50 million dollars in financial settlements to victims of abuse, no matter when the abuse occurred.

The New Jersey Catholic Conference has offered to work with Members of the Legislature who are sponsors of bills to amend the statute of limitations. We fully support the complete elimination of the statute of limitations prospectively for both perpetrators and institutions. We support the elimination of the statute of limitations retroactively for perpetrators. As Senator Joseph Vitale often notes, the vast majority of perpetrators are not clergy.

Now is not a time for just more analysis and study. This is a time for action to prevent any future abuse anywhere it might occur. The Catholic Bishops of New Jersey stand ready, as we have for the past two decades.

Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, C.Ss.R.
Archbishop, Archdiocese of Newark

Most Reverend James F. Checchio
Bishop, Diocese of Metuchen

Most Reverend David M. O’Connell, C.M.
Bishop, Diocese of Trenton

Most Reverend John W. Flesey,
Auxiliary Bishop, Archdiocese of Newark

Most Reverend Dennis J. Sullivan
Bishop, Diocese of Camden

Most Reverend Manuel A. Cruz
Auxiliary Bishop, Archdiocese of Newark

Most Reverend Arthur J. Serratelli
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