

LETTER TO THE PEOPLE OF THE DIOCESE OF ST. PETERSBURG
FROM BISHOP ROBERT LYNCH
CONCERNING THE DIOCESE'S RESPONSE
TO THE SEXUAL ABUSE OF MINORS BY PRIESTS

These last two years have been a painful time for all Catholics. The growing awareness of the number of children who have been abused by priests gave rise in many to feelings of betrayal, anger, loss of faith in the Church and sometimes even in God. For the victims of this misconduct, the almost daily news of additional priest abusers and the failure of some diocesan bishops and some superiors of religious congregations to remove the offending priests from their ministry gave rise to a new sense of re-victimization. For those victims who had harbored these horrible, painful memories within themselves, the sudden freedom to tell their story and be believed was accompanied by a renewed sense of hurt and betrayal by persons and the Church they once trusted. For their parents and families, disbelief and consternation quickly gave way to deep disappointment and anger with the Church.

The Church is also a family, and like a family, has been deeply hurt and scarred by the sex-abuse scandal that developed in 2002. Some people have left the Church because of this scandal; what was once an implicit trust in bishops and priests has given way in some instances to distrust, doubt and despair.

In this letter to the members of the Roman Catholic Church of the Diocese of St. Petersburg, I wish to do four things: apologize again to those who have suffered sexual abuse at the hands of priests; apologize again to the whole Church of St. Petersburg which has suffered through the last two years; tell you the scope of the abuse situation since the founding of the diocese with facts and figures; and finally, tell what the Diocese of St. Petersburg has done and is continuing to do to prevent such devastating acts of abuse from happening again.

APOLOGY TO THE VICTIM SURVIVORS AND THEIR FAMILIES

I am deeply sorry for, and ashamed of, what was done to you. And I realize that no words are likely to heal the searing wounds that you experience and feel; words can come far too easily and may seem cheap. I do know that I speak not only for myself but for all good and devoted priests, and for the members of our Catholic Church, in expressing our most profound apology and our sorrow for the unspeakable harm and hurt which has been done to you. I can ask for your forgiveness but I cannot ask you to forget.

While no human can see perfectly into the psyche of another, I can only assure you that no priest, religious or employee known to have abused a minor will be allowed to continue in public ministry. Additionally, all those who wish to participate in the Church's ministry will be screened, educated and supervised in their activities. I dedicate my service as bishop to assuring you that every possible protection will be provided for children now and in the future. Your own devastating experience has aided the Church in dealing with this problem for the future. In every instance, my first reaction to any credible report of an abused minor has been to offer victims and their parents and families pastoral assistance and counseling. Sometimes, when litigation seems likely, your own legal counsel has advised that we not meet or speak. Although I

understand why lawyers give this advice, I personally find it very painful because it is contrary to the very human need for healing and reconciliation. I want you to know that I am prepared to meet with any person who was abused as a minor by a priest or employee of this diocese. I want all to know that the diocese has a Victim Assistance Minister in the person of Marti Zeitz, who can be reached toll free at 1-866-407-4505. My first goal has always been and will always be to focus on your healing. I offer, again, an invitation to anyone who was abused as a child by a clergyman, employee or volunteer of this diocese: please come forward and allow me to help you begin the process of healing.

When an individual goes to confession to confess a grave sin, he or she is given a penance to perform. As a sign of public penance, I will ask each parish in the diocese during this coming Lent to include in the Sunday "Prayers of the Faithful" a petition seeking healing for those harmed by anyone in the service of the Church and for the forgiveness of God for the sin of child abuse in our world and Church. I will also conduct and invite you to attend a special service at the Cathedral of St. Jude at which I will ask God's pardon and mercy as well as forgiveness from those abused. The Church is ashamed and in sorrow. That firm purpose of amendment which is necessary for individual forgiveness of sins must be a resounding "never again" in our diocese and the entire Church.

APOLOGY TO THE PEOPLE OF THE DIOCESE OF ST. PETERSBURG

You also have been hurt. Hurt, in the first instance, by the actions of some priests and then by the manner in which some bishops in the country have dealt with this situation. You love Christ and you love the Church. It has not been easy for you to arise each morning and read the daily newspapers these past few years or watch the television news or listen to radio and learn of what became an almost daily dose of terrible news about the Church.

The people of the universal Church, and particularly our diocese, have always been very generous in their support of their priests, and generous even in forgiving the human failings of priests. Much of the sense of betrayal felt by Catholics in this country comes, I think, from the realization that your generosity and forgiveness have been taken for granted in some notorious instances. Rightfully you have asked in disbelief how any bishop or religious superior could allow a priest who sexually molested a minor to continue in ministry, often to re-offend.

There is no question in my mind that just as the actions of some priests have seriously wounded the Church of Christ, the decisions of and lack of supervision by some bishops have done the same.

As your bishop, even before I analyze the experience of the Diocese of St. Petersburg, I wish to say to you that I am profoundly sorry that you have had to endure this embarrassment and pain. In time, I hope and pray you can find it in your heart to forgive the sins of omission, as well as commission, which are a part of this tragedy. Help me to heal the pain of the Church of St. Petersburg, to bind up the wounds of the abused, to protect all our children as well as our vulnerable elderly, and to ensure integrity and honesty in all our stewardship of the gifts of your faith to your Church.

THE SITUATION IN ST. PETERSBURG

Since our establishment as a diocese in 1968, about 4,000 priests have been issued “faculties,” or granted permission to function as priestly ministers, in this diocese. As of this writing, I can inform you of the following:

Seven priests of the Diocese of St. Petersburg have been credibly accused of sexual abuse of a minor or minors. Their names are: Rocco D’Angelo, Richard Allen, William Lau, Hubert Reason, James Russo, Robert Schaeufele and J. Keith Symons.

The Diocese of St. Petersburg has received credible accusations against a priest of another diocese who, in the past, worked in parishes of the Diocese of St. Petersburg. His name is Polienato Bernabe.

The Diocese of St. Petersburg has received credible accusations against two priests from religious orders who, in the past, worked in parishes of the Diocese of St. Petersburg. Their names are Russell Gerald Appleby and Norman Rogge.

Two priests (one diocesan and one religious) have been accused, but the accusations against them were found to be false. One additional diocesan priest was accused but steadfastly denied the allegations; following an extensive investigation, the allegation could not be proved. That priest was returned to ministry. Another priest from another diocese was accused recently; he denied the allegations but chose to resign from ministry.

Most of the cases listed above came to light and were addressed in the 1990’s; some have come to the attention of the diocese more recently. In that time, and through June 30, 2003, the following amounts have been paid by the insurance carriers or insurance fund reserves of the diocese:

\$750,000 has been paid in settlements to victims of priests.

\$118,000 has been paid for counseling assistance to victims and their families.

\$193,000 has been paid in legal fees, Safe Environment Program training fees and for the Office of the Victim Assistance Minister.

All monies which have been paid to victims of sexual misconduct by priests have come either from insurance underwriters or from existing insurance reserves within the Diocesan Property and Liability Insurance Fund. No monies have come from the Bishop’s Annual Pastoral Appeal or the Our Journey in Faith Capital Campaign. The diocese is absolutely committed to responsible stewardship of the funds contributed for the Church’s apostolic works.

Although I believe in my heart that this diocese has not been guilty of negligent supervision of any priest who abused a minor since the mid-eighties, I have entered reasonable settlement agreements as outlined above because I felt that an individual had indeed been harmed by a priest of this diocese. I have done so for pastoral and not for legal reasons. In good conscience, I cannot acquiesce to large and unreasonable demands by attorneys. Large and unreasonable

demands would likely require the diocese to mount a full legal response. I believe that you, the people of the diocese, would expect me to do so, in good stewardship.

THE FUTURE

As I mentioned earlier, it is not possible for any human to see into the hearts and psyches of others. As your bishop, I have an obligation to do everything reasonable to protect all children in the care of our parishes and diocesan schools. In fulfilling this sacred trust, I and the diocese promise the following:

- (1) Any report of sexual misconduct with a minor reported to any employee or volunteer of the diocese will be reported as required by Florida statute to the appropriate civil authorities. This includes reports of abuse of children by anyone: priest, deacon, religious, teacher, employee, volunteer, parent, grandparent, anyone.
- (2) We will continue to enforce strictly our policy requiring all employees of the diocese or any of its parishes, schools or other institutions to be subjected to a criminal background check and fingerprinting. This includes priests coming from other dioceses in the country and from elsewhere in the world. All volunteers who work with children will also receive a criminal background check.
- (3) Training in how to maintain a “safe environment” for all children has already begun in the diocese and will continue annually. Quite frankly, we need the help of all people to be observant always. When questions arise, help should be sought from one’s pastor or from my office. I promise to act on all complaints that are received.
- (4) The full implementation of the Charter for the Protection of Young People, passed in Dallas in June, 2002, will continue. This means that we will actively enforce the policies in the Charter and be accountable for such enforcement. We will investigate every complaint and report those that are credible to civil authorities and to our independent Diocesan Review Board.
- (5) Priests will carefully adhere to the Standards for Professional Conduct which have been in effect for some years and which are currently being updated.
- (6) The Diocese will maintain a Victim Assistance Minister to help any victims find the assistance they might need for the healing, help and guidance that they need.
- (7) No priest against whom a credible complaint of child abuse has been made and investigated will ever be reassigned or allowed to serve in ministry here or in another diocese. We will continue our policy of making public all allegations which appear to be credible, and in such cases we will make every effort to identify other possible victims. In the case of the non-ordained employee about whom a credible complaint has been made, the same protocols will apply.
- (8) Litigation is not the Church’s preferred way to respond to the devastation of child sexual abuse. It is often not a pathway to the truth and it can stand in the way of genuine communication of human needs and human response. Where necessary, however, we may have to defend the diocese, especially if the diocese had no previous knowledge concerning a priest’s behavior and was not negligent in supervision. This does not preclude the offer of pastoral assistance in some

manner to the abused which might even be in the form of some financial assistance to reimburse the victim for expenses incurred as a result of the abuse, past, present or future.

- (9) As bishop, I renew my pledge to meet with any person who was a victim of sexual misconduct as a minor by a priest or employee of the Diocese of St. Petersburg.

In the midst of all the pain of the past several years, the Church has continued to serve God's people with integrity and selfless service. Beyond the sacramental life, which is itself very significant, we have continued to serve those in need. We have opened one new high school, expanded the facilities of another; the remaining two high schools will soon begin construction on their new buildings. The Word of God has been proclaimed "in season and out of season." Many good and dedicated priests continue to serve in our parishes and schools. It has not been an easy time to be a priest, but the priests of our diocese have remained faithful witnesses to the Gospel and faithful to their ordination commitments.

Our diocese is a great Church with wonderful priests, deacons, religious sisters and brothers and laity. We remain on message and on task. I hope that this report to the people will be seen as an opportunity for the Church to put the past behind it, even while I attempt to minister, in a caring and pastoral manner, to those hurt in the past.

Finally, I wish to express to you, the Catholic people of our diocese, my gratitude and love for remaining steadfast in faith during these challenging times, for believing in the Church and for supporting your parish priests. These same priests time and again have told me stories from your parishes of your fidelity and of your support. It is a privilege for us to serve you. We recognize the sacred trust that you place in the Church, and we renew our promise to serve you with integrity and selflessness. May God continue to bless the Church of west central Florida which is the Diocese of St. Petersburg.

Sincerely yours in Christ,
Most Reverend Robert N. Lynch
Bishop of St. Petersburg