



August 17, 2018

My Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

I write to you today in the aftermath of the recent revelations about the abuse of power and sexual misconduct of Archbishop Theodore McCarrick and the disclosures made in the Interim Report of the Pennsylvania Grand Jury regarding the sexual abuse of children by priests and the inaction of bishops to protect children from harm. I am especially disheartened to learn of the failure of the late Cardinal William H. Keeler to protect children during his ministry as Bishop of the Diocese of Harrisburg, and, early in his ministry as Archbishop of Baltimore, that he allowed a Jesuit priest, whom he knew abused young people in Harrisburg, to minister in our Archdiocese. I worked with Cardinal Keeler two times: when he first arrived in Baltimore as our Archbishop, I was the Archdiocesan Vocation Director, and again when he appointed me to the Division of Clergy Personnel in 2002. I can say that from 2002 until his retirement, he was a strong advocate for victims of sexual child abuse by clergy and was committed to discipline and remove priests, who were credibly accused of sexual abuse of children and vulnerable adults, from the priesthood. This is not to excuse or diminish his accountability or his responsibility for his failure to protect children and young people prior to 2002. His memory is tarnished by this. In 2002 when he was the first U.S. bishop to disclose a list of all credibly accused priests and deacons in our archdiocese, he asked that people pray for him for the mistakes he made in the past. None of us were aware of these failures and mistakes at that time. I suspect he lived with that regret for the rest of his life.

During my ten years (2002-2012) in the Division of Clergy Personnel, I served on the Archdiocesan Team that investigated all allegations of sexual abuse by priests and other church ministers. It was a trying, but necessary, responsibility. I met with victims, listened to horrifying stories and confronted those who were accused. I believe the Team did excellent work and we helped to protect children and vulnerable adults and we worked to establish systems for screening of seminarians and reporting with ease all allegations of sexual abuse by priests, deacons, and seminarians.

I learned a few things about sexual abuse and the protection of minors and the vulnerable in those years.

First, sin and evil are real. Despite every effort the church makes to prevent priests and deacons from sexually abusing children, there is no guarantee that it will not happen. What is important is that the church does all that it can to prevent it and to respond immediately upon learning of an incident by providing care for the victim and discipline—including removal from active ministry and the return to the lay state—the offender. In Baltimore, we have done this since the USCCB's Dallas Charter of 2002. The one area the Charter did not address was the accountability of bishops who failed to protect children and take disciplinary action with priests who had abused children. This was clearly a mistake, and I believe the USCCB is committed to correct this at its fall plenary session. It also needs to discover the cause of this mistake and correct it.

Second, every member of the church needs to take responsibility for creating a safe environment for children and adults. If we see or hear something, we need to report it to the archdiocesan authorities and to civil authorities. In Maryland, every citizen is required to report any incident of sexual abuse of children or vulnerable adults to civil authorities. We require all of those who minister in our parish to be screened through the VIRTUS Program. This is to protect children from abuse. It is disheartening when folks come to me to ask for an exception to this policy or refuse to participate in it. The next time you hear this kind of protest or feel your own resistance to it, remember the PA grand jury report and all of the stories of child sexual abuse by the clergy and other church ministers. Know that I do not make exceptions to this policy. We all have a part to play in protecting our children and vulnerable adults from harm.

Third, when incidents of sexual abuse of children by clergy and other church ministers become public, it brings pain to those who have been abused in the past. Please know that if this is the case with you, I am more than ready to meet with you. If you do not want to meet with me, you can meet with Fr. Josh (410-923-7013 or joshua.laws@archbalt.org), or contact the Office of Youth and Child Protection (410-547-5438). If you need help with this, know that it is here for you. If you were abused by a priest or any church minister, either in Baltimore or elsewhere, and have not reported it, it is important that you do so. Call the Office of Child and Youth Protection at 410-547-5438 or see me (410-923-7016 or joconnor@archbalt.org) or Fr. Josh.

Fourth, prayer is important at this time. As a church, we need to pray for all victims of child abuse by clergy and church ministers. We need to pray for those charged with healing this grievous wound on the Body of Christ. We pray for ourselves too that we might not lose hope during this difficult time of anger, hurt, and disillusionment. There will be those who will walk away from the Church in anger. This is understandable, but, I believe, it is a mistake. We should not let anyone's sin and evil-doing separate us from the Church. We need to pray for the Church that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, will guide us through this terrible time and that Christ, the Healer, will heal our Church and restore it to holiness.

Fifth, we should not overlook the importance of penance and fasting in the face of this evil. We do penance and fast not to punish ourselves but to make reparation for the sins of others and for the failures of shepherds who did not protect children and vulnerable adults. Through our personal penance and fasting, we can, by God's grace, help to purify our church and make it strong again. I am doing penance now and I invite you, in your own way, to join me.

Sixth, we must remember that we are the Church, the People of God. We have all been hurt by the evil behavior of those who have abused children. When one part of the Body of Christ is injured we all are injured. When one brother or sister is abused, we are all abused. As a priest, I am embarrassed and ashamed of the harm that some of my brother priests have done. It is inexcusable. As a brother, I pray that God will be merciful to them. I invite you to do the same when the time is right for you. As a member of the presbyterate of Baltimore, some of whose members have seriously injured and ruined the lives of children and damaged their souls, I apologize for their evil behavior. I promise to do all that I can to work with our staff and you to assure that there is a safe environment for all who come to Our Lady of the Fields. I am ready and willing to speak with anyone who needs to be heard and helped at this time. I ask you to pray with me that God will bring healing to all victims of sexual child abuse and help all of us recover from this wound that we might, with confidence, continue to proclaim the Gospel as Jesus' missionary disciples. May Mary, the Mother of Sorrows, accompany us along this journey of tears that leads us to healing. Our Lady of the Fields, pray for us.

May God's Peace be Yours,
Msgr. Jay