



DIOCESE OF FORT WAYNE - SOUTH BEND

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My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The re-emergence of the clergy sex abuse crisis has affected us all – priests, deacons, religious, laity and me, as well as, and most importantly, the victims of sexual abuse. We all feel disgust, frustration, and pain about this wound in the Body of Christ, the abuse of innocent children and young people and the often life-long suffering that results.

The present crisis in the Church was provoked by the report of the Pennsylvania Grand Jury and by the revelations about sexual misconduct and abuse by Archbishop McCarrick. We were pained about clergy sexual abuse in 2002. However, even though almost all the cases in the grand jury report were from the past, what provoked so much outrage and hurt from the recent report was the sheer number of cases (300 abusers and over 1000 victims in six dioceses), the graphic and horrific details of the abuse described by the report, the often-calling treatment of victims by Church leaders, and the negligence of bishops in not protecting children and young people from predators. Further, the thus-far inexplicable case of Archbishop McCarrick's conduct and how it was not dealt with by Church authorities have also provoked outrage.

During this time of trial, I invite all of us together to reflect on these words of Saint Paul to the Romans: "Let love be sincere; hate what is evil, hold on to what is good." Love is our highest obligation and the greatest virtue. Christian living is faith working through love. The priesthood is an office of love. The abuse of a minor is a grave violation of that love, not only causing terrible emotional, psychological, and physical harm, but also damaging the soul. It is evil. We must hate it and eradicate it from our Church and society. "Hate what is evil, hold on to what is good." There is so much good that our Church does, good that is often overshadowed by the evil of sexual abuse. We must not cease doing good as we fight to eradicate this evil.

In this situation, doing good includes helping victim-survivors of abuse to heal. Though this has been a priority for me and our diocese for years, I want it to be an even higher priority. For this reason, I recently released to the public the names of clergy of our diocese credibly accused of abuse. I did this as a way to help victims in the healing process. I have already received messages of thanks from victim-survivors who have told me that it has helped them to

feel vindicated. I want to do all that is possible to bring the love of Christ and the love of the Church to these victim-survivors. I invite all the faithful to join me in offering prayers and sacrifices for our brothers and sisters who are victim-survivors of abuse.

We know that since 2002 and the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, the Church in our diocese and throughout the United States has instituted robust policies and procedures to keep children and young people safe. We know that the number of abuse cases has dramatically declined in the past few decades and that, even before 2002, our diocese has had zero tolerance for priests credibly accused of sexual abuse of minors. From the time I became Bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend, all credible accusations have been reported to law enforcement, not only those that are required by law, as was the previous practice.

So what can we learn from the Pennsylvania grand jury report? We learn that we cannot grow slack in our youth protection efforts. We must stay the course. And we must continue to seek ways to strengthen our efforts and improve our policies. I mentioned the huge decline in cases of abuse by clergy in the past few decades, but we cannot be satisfied until there are zero cases of abuse.

Also, I wholeheartedly support the actions recently taken by the Administrative Committee of the USCCB to have a full investigation by lay experts regarding the Archbishop McCarrick case, to establish a third-party reporting system to receive complaints of sexual abuse or misconduct by bishops, and to develop a process to hold bishops accountable for negligence in dealing with cases of sexual abuse.

Many people have asked me what they can do to help the Church in the midst of this crisis, in this time of shame and sorrow. Besides supporting the actions of reform mentioned above, I believe that all of us are called to re-commit ourselves to the pursuit of holiness, to pray for the Church and for victim-survivors, and to do penance and reparation for the sins and crimes of those who have abused or have been negligent in protecting minors or assisting victims. This is part of our Catholic faith – to do reparation not only for our own sins, but for sins of others in the Body of Christ. Jesus, though innocent, suffered for us sinners and redeemed us. We can unite our prayers and sufferings with Him for others and for the Church. Our Lady asked us to do so in her messages at Fatima. Our Lord asked us to do reparation to His Sacred Heart in His words to Saint Margaret Mary. Though this may be difficult to do, we are also called to pray for those who have committed these sins and crimes.

I have designated the First Friday of October (October 5th) as a Diocesan Day of Prayer and Penance. Traditionally, the first Friday of the month is dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. I invite everyone and all our parishes, schools, and institutions especially to observe this day of dedication to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, praying and fasting for the victim-survivors of sexual abuse and for their healing, while asking for God's mercy on the whole Church and for the grace of purification and renewal during this difficult time. I suggest special Masses, Holy

Hours, the Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary, the Stations of the Cross, the Divine Mercy chaplet, the praying of the Penitential Psalms, or other prayers, as well as fasting or other acts of penance for these intentions. I am hoping for a great outpouring of petition to the Sacred Heart of Our Lord, the heart of perfect love.

We must remember that the very core of our faith is not Church leaders, but Jesus Christ and the beautiful and powerful truth communicated by the Holy Spirit to Saint John that "God is love." I recently read remarks by Bishop Robert Barron in which he addressed the question of why remain Catholic in the face of this crisis in the Church. He wrote: "Keep in mind everybody, we are not Catholic because of the moral excellence of our leaders. I mean, God help us if we were. We want our leaders – indeed, we expect our leaders – to be morally excellent. But we are not Catholics because of that moral excellence. We're Catholics because of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen from the dead. We're Catholics because of the Trinitarian love of God. We're Catholics because of the Mystical Body of Christ. We're Catholics because of the sacraments. We're Catholics especially because of the Eucharist. We're Catholics because of the Blessed Mother. We're Catholics because of the saints. Even as leaders in the Church fail morally, the Catholic Church remains the Mystical Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ. And she's worth fighting for."

Only love can triumph over the evils of our time. We turn to the Sacred Heart of Jesus for His merciful love upon us and upon His Church. The love of Jesus conquers the devil. And the love of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, the most beautiful reflection of Christ's love, is victorious over Satan's evil. I have heard that the Prayer of Saint Michael is being prayed at Mass in many of our parishes. I encourage priests in all our parishes to pray this prayer with their congregations immediately after the conclusion of every Mass since there is certainly a diabolical element in the crisis we face. It is good to ask Saint Michael the Archangel to defend us in our battle against evil in the Church and society.

We can only overcome evil with good, Saint Paul teaches us. The greatest good is the love of God represented by the Sacred Heart of Jesus and poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. This is the source of our hope. As Saint Paul wrote to the Romans: "nothing can separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus, our Lord." And let us trust in the teaching of Saint Paul that "where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more."

I wish to thank all of you for all your love and prayers for me and our priests during the past several weeks. We have so many good and holy priests who are also feeling pain during this time. Also, please pray for our seminarians, faith-filled and courageous young men preparing for the priesthood during this challenging time. Let us remember our priests and seminarians also on October 5th, that they may be comforted by the love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. And please continue to pray for me.

I feel incredibly blessed to be your bishop. Please know that I pray for you, the faithful of our diocese, every day. I am so grateful for your fidelity and perseverance during this difficult time, for your commitment to the Lord and His Church. I've been thinking of other times of terrible sin and corruption in the history of the Church. What happened during those times? Great saints arose and genuine reform took place. That is what we need most today – holy men and women who live faithful lives of discipleship. Besides prayer, it is our own witness of faith and love that is really important, as well as our commitment to overcome evil with good.

I would like to end this letter with words prayed by then-Cardinal Ratzinger on Good Friday at the Stations of the Cross at the Colosseum in Rome in 2005. I invite you to recite this prayer also:

“Through your passion, crucifixion, death, and resurrection, Jesus, you have brought us the gift of forgiveness of sins. Cleanse and purify the Church you love of the sins of abuse and misconduct which have seriously wounded the Church. Bring healing and love to victims. Help us all to rededicate ourselves to the pursuit of true holiness. Amen.”

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+ Kevin C. Rhoades

Most Reverend Kevin C. Rhoades
Bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend

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