

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Bishop McKnight

We are Catholic

When our Lord established the Church, he promised to remain with us always until the end of the world. Jesus gave us the gift of the papacy and the Sacrament of Holy Orders to preserve the Church's communion with Him despite the works of the Evil One. The Infallibility of the pope and the infallibility of the bishops collectively in union with him guarantees the truthfulness of the central doctrines of the Catholic Church, and that her formally promulgated dogmas will always be preserved from error. ("You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it." Mt 16:18)

But the Lord gave no guarantee church leaders would be free from errors in their prudential, administrative judgments, or as we have seen lately on a horrific scale, in their moral lives.

The Church's gaping wound of clergy sexual abuse is so painful for us Catholics because some of those responsible for preserving the communion of the Church in what we believe, in how we pray, and how we live as Christians have instead severely damaged our communion with the Lord and one another. Their active cover-up or passive silence when clergy abusers were continued in the ministry or promoted in office gravely compromised the credibility of the hierarchy, and by extension, the whole Church. Whether we are individually guilty or not for the clergy sex abuse crisis plaguing our Church, we all share responsibility for getting it fixed. We are all in this together, and every bishop, including the Bishop of Rome, must face this moral catastrophe with their people and not separate from them.

In matters as grave as sexual abuse, I know I should not make decisions alone or with a small group of clergy advisors. I want to work together with you, all the people of the Diocese, so that we can better preserve the communion of the Church with the Lord and each other. My role as your diocesan bishop, fundamentally, is to foster the communion of the Diocese; in so doing, I am your servant. In my recent statement following the revelations of the Archbishop Theodore McCarrick scandal, and in my letter to the clergy and faithful of the Diocese after the release of the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report, I promised greater transparency. Transparency serves all of us: survivors of abuse, the faithful, our good priests and deacons. Today, I am keeping my promise to you by updating you on recent developments and progress we have made towards transparency and healing.

Abuse in Our Diocese

Soon after I arrived in the Diocese in February, I contracted a firm of retired FBI and law enforcement agents to conduct an independent review of all files of living clergy (priests and deacons) and seminarians of the Diocese. They have confirmed we have no clergy in active ministry with violations of the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, which was established by the US bishops in 2002. In addition, I have been reviewing the files of our deceased clergy.

As we were preparing to release all of this information, the state attorney general, Josh Hawley, received a request from the Archdiocese of St. Louis to review their files. General Hawley encouraged the other three dioceses in the state to do likewise. On Thursday, Aug. 23, I submitted a request to include the Diocese of Jefferson City in the attorney general's investigation. To ensure integrity of the attorney general's investigation, we have suspended work on the release of information until we receive further information from the attorney general.

If anyone in the public knows of clergy who have abused, or if any survivors of sexual abuse by one of our clergy have not yet come forward to make a complaint, I plead for you to do so now. Our Victim Assistance Coordinator stands ready to provide help, as well as to facilitate making a complaint with the Diocese. Even if you don't find it necessary to do this for your well-being, I ask you to consider coming forward anyway to help others heal and move forward. If you have been harmed, we need to apologize to you and seek your forgiveness.

Nancy Hoey is our Victim Assistance Coordinator. She is a licensed professional counselor and a certified clinical trauma professional. You may email her at reportabuse@diojeffcity.org or call her at 573-694-3199. Also, the Missouri Child Abuse & Neglect Hotline is 1-800-392-3738 and the Missouri Adult Abuse and Neglect Hotline is 1-800-392-0210. In addition, the attorney general has an online form to report clergy abuse: <https://ago.mo.gov/other-resources/clergy-abuse-resources>.

When the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report was released, I directed staff to compare the names listed on the grand jury report with our clergy records. We discovered Fr. John (Jack) Pender, a deceased priest of the Diocese of Scranton, who is listed in the grand jury report and who served in our Diocese in the parishes of St. Roberts and Crocker during the decades of the 1970s and 1980s. We ask anyone with information about Fr. Pender to contact the Victim Assistance Coordinator at 573-694-3199.

Moving Forward

As brothers and sisters in the Lord, we are family. And when one suffers, we all suffer. In moving forward to heal the wounds of sexual abuse and the breach of trust this tragedy has caused, I am immediately establishing certain interim policies for the well-being of the Diocese until further direction is given by higher authorities or until they can be reviewed by representatives of the lay faithful and clergy for their input.

The Archbishop McCarrick scandal made clear one of the weaknesses of the Charter: There is no established protocol on how to handle an accusation made against the bishop of a diocese. To rectify this problem immediately, I am establishing a protocol to govern what happens if an accusation is made against the sitting bishop of the Diocese of Jefferson City. Any accusation of sexual abuse made against the bishop will be referred to an independent investigator, who will make an initial determination of whether or not the accusation has the semblance of truth. If so, the bishop will request from the Holy Father a leave of absence until a preliminary investigation can be completed and a report submitted to the Review Board of the Archdiocese of St. Louis. The Review Board of the Archdiocese will then make a recommendation to the apostolic nuncio. Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, the archbishop of Galveston-Houston and president of the USCCB, has publicized that the November meeting of U.S. bishops will address establishing national protocols to handle accusations made against diocesan bishops. When such a national process is enacted, it will replace this interim protocol.

A Diocesan Review Board was established in 2003, which is primarily composed of competent laity who are independent of the Bishop, to advise the Bishop on accusations of sexual abuse of a minor made against a cleric. In my six months as Bishop, the Review Board's advice has been extremely helpful. I will continue to utilize fully our Diocesan Review Board, and I ask competent lay people of the Diocese to consider applying to serve on it. We are looking for lay people with backgrounds in law, law enforcement, psychology, psychiatry, human resources, child development, and information technology.

There are two other significant councils, representative of the laity and the priests of the Diocese, with whom I will collaborate to consider new policies and to review existing policies pertaining to the clergy sexual abuse crisis. This summer, the priests of the Diocese elected their presbyteral council representatives, and I accepted eight deans nominated by the priests of each deanery. The deans and the priest representatives together constitute our Presbyteral Council.

I will soon be forming a Diocesan Pastoral Council constituted by representatives of the laity from each deanery region, a representative of the religious sisters serving in our Diocese, and a representative each of the priests and deacons. I pledge to use the DPC as the main structure for reviewing existing policies and proposing new ones.

A Mass of healing will be scheduled to express our sorrow for the sins of sexual abuse and the abuse of power by clergy, as well as for the healing of all those affected by this scandal.

I look forward to working with survivors of all kinds of abuse, whether by clergy or others, to learn how the Church might best respond to their needs as members of our spiritual family. I ask everyone to pray for the healing of the wounds of the Church, especially for the healing of survivors of sexual abuse, and to regain our sense of communion with one another and the Lord Jesus.