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A time of atonement, reparation and reorganization

Archbishop Michael Byrnes' message
updating the Faithful on bankruptcy

Dear brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ,

I share this letter both to update and encourage the Faithful of our Catholic Church on Guam regarding our difficult journey of bankruptcy.

First however, it's important to once again clearly state the reason the Archdiocese of Agaña is in this state of bankruptcy, otherwise known as Chapter 11 Reorganization. Essentially, our Church is in a period of atonement, reparation and reorganization because of the grave harm our archdiocese inflicted upon numerous children in the past. Too many of our priests and some lay persons perpetrated these heinous crimes of sexual abuse on innocent youth, who had placed their utmost trust in them.

This is not a revelation. For nearly a decade now, extensive news accounts locally and internationally have described the agony of these victims who as adults have now filed hundreds of lawsuits against our archdiocese and other groups such as the Boy Scouts of America.

However, knowing something and accepting something are not the same thing. As we take our next steps amid this penitential season of Lent, I again implore all Catholics on Guam to wholeheartedly accept the truth of our sins and the collective responsibility that we all must bring peace and healing to those who have suffered sexual abuse in our archdiocese.

Many of you have already sacrificed tremendously and continue to act toward reparation and healing. I sincerely thank you for that. Painfully, yet with complete trust in our Lord, I must openly share that more immediate sacrifices and difficult decisions must be made by all the faithful at our parishes, schools, ministries, as well as the Chancery of our Catholic Church on Guam.

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Our archdiocese is working expeditiously to create a revised proposal of compensation for the 280-plus victims of sexual abuse who have filed lawsuits against the archdiocese. Recognizing that the victim-survivors of clergy abuse have suffered deeply for far too long, and after several failed attempts to reach settlement in the past three years, both sides have agreed to work together in a renewed spirit focused on achieving reparation and compensation to the victims. However, we must move very rapidly.

Knowing that funds further diminish with each passing day, Judge Frances Tydingco-Gatwood of the District Court of Guam has set an aggressive timeline for our archdiocese to develop its new proposal. We MUST have our new settlement offer ready by March 25 as attorneys return to court for a pivotal status hearing.

Thus, the archdiocese, through our Guam-based legal counsel, Attorney John Terlaje, has been meeting with parishes and schools in vitally important gatherings to discuss what each entity is able to further contribute to the enormous goal at hand. Father Romeo Convocar whom I have assigned as Vicar General of the archdiocese effective in May, is accompanying Attorney Terlaje.

Last February 26, the judge ruled in favor of the victim-survivors’ Creditors’ Committee and determined that the archdiocese is essentially one body. Therefore, all assets, properties and cash of schools and parishes are subject to inclusion in the compensation package, as we strive to reach a settlement.

Since the judge’s ruling, the archdiocese has held urgent informational meetings with the leaders of our Catholic parishes and schools and representatives of their important groups such as finance councils, school boards and other leadership groups. Members of our Chancery leadership, the Archdiocesan Finance Council (AFC), and the College of Consultors, have been part of these meetings with our attorneys.

I acknowledge the many intense emotions of our Catholic Faithful during this journey of atonement, reparation and reorganization. You are angry, saddened, frustrated and bewildered. It is understandable. Many of you have toiled, sacrificed and contributed to building and sustaining our schools and parishes in numerous ways that span generations.

However, this is the painful reality we must face: many of our assets MUST be contributed for the Church to reach an end to bankruptcy. There is light at the end of all of this, however. It is the Light of our Creator who calls us to do the right thing, when we have wronged others.

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We remain committed to bringing the greatest measure of justice and consolation to those who have suffered sexual abuse by our clergy and laity. We pray that we will be able to do this while keeping intact our ministries in our parishes and schools.

It is God’s providence that we enter this next phase of our bankruptcy journey during the holy season of Lent, which commemorates Jesus Christ’s 40 days of fasting, prayer and sacrifice in the desert. He is the one whom we must imitate. He is our truth, our peace and salvation.

In the desert of our difficulties and despair, please remember that God never abandons us. “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, on your own intelligence do not rely; In all your ways be mindful of him, and he will make straight your paths.” — Proverbs 3:5-6.

I firmly believe that our merciful Father will help the Church during this difficult period today and in our work to sustain ourselves and heal the broken among us in the years ahead. Please continue to believe in Him and our Church.

Yours in Jesus Christ,

+ Michael J. Byrnes, S.T.D.
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Archbishop of Agaña