

## **An Open Letter from Matthew H. Clark, Bishop of Rochester**

*The following letter was published on January 5, 2004, in the Catholic Courier newspaper*

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I have communicated to you many times over the past years about the issue of sexual abuse by clergy. In all my communications, both directly and through our local media, I have tried to express the enormity of my own personal sorrow and disappointment over this issue, which I have said is one of the most difficult issues of my four decades of priesthood and nearly 25 years as your Bishop.

In those communications and in such other ways as the recent diocesan-sponsored Day of Reconciliation in Canandaigua with victims of clergy sexual abuse and their families, our Diocese has sought to reach out to those who were hurt in the past by the behavior of some of our priests. I have offered then -- and I offer now -- my sincere apologies on behalf of our local Church, and a personal pledge to each and every one of the victims and to all our faithful: We will work tirelessly and do everything within our power to prevent such incidents now and in the future. This we promise.

One of the most important ways we can create a safe and holy environment for all -- but especially for our children, young people and vulnerable adults -- is to firmly grasp whether we are on the right course in our work toward that end. Also crucial is that we understand the scope of the problem in our past. Regarding those issues, I want to inform you of two important matters.

First, I am very pleased to announce that an audit by an independent firm has found the Diocese of Rochester in full compliance with the provisions of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*.

The finding of full compliance by an independent body is a clear indicator that we are taking the necessary steps to ensure a safe and holy environment for all children, youth and vulnerable adults.

The *Charter*, which the Catholic bishops of the United States adopted in 2002 and which had my full support, requires that each Diocese of the United States initiate specific actions to create safe environments. Among these actions is to conduct background checks of all employees, volunteers and others; awareness training; and public outreach. The *Charter* also directs action in the following areas: healing and reconciliation of victims and survivors; prompt and effective response to allegations; cooperation with civil authorities; disciplining offenders; and providing means of accountability for the future to ensure effective future handling of the problem through a national Office of Child and Youth Protection and a National Review Board.

I am confident we are taking the right steps to accomplish our mission of prevention through such measures as criminal background checks of all employees and volunteers who work with minors and vulnerable adults, through a new Pastoral Code of Conduct, and the extensive and multi-layered awareness training we are providing.

We will be ever vigilant.

The audit of our policies and procedures was thorough. A former FBI agent and a former Illinois state trooper working for the Gavin Group of Boston -- the private firm contracted by the U.S. bishops to conduct the audits -- examined records and policies and conducted interviews with me and other key diocesan officials over a one-week period in September. At the request of the auditors, the Diocese revised and distributed a pamphlet on procedures for filing a complaint, updated existing priest personnel policies to be consistent with the *Charter* and provided an implementation plan for "safe environment" training pertaining to parents and children.

Out of fairness to other dioceses whose reviews were not yet completed, we withheld information about the local results until all dioceses had been audited and a national report could be issued today (Jan. 6). The local audit determined that the program and policies we have put into place are in compliance with the *Charter*. Other Dioceses in the country have sought at least one tool we are using: a video we produced with the help of the Archdiocese of Baltimore to train volunteers in preventing sexual abuse and related issues.

Some of these steps are not new. The Diocese of Rochester has had a sexual-abuse policy in place since 1993, and was among the first in the nation to initiate specific programs designed to raise awareness and prevent abuse. Over the past two years, the amount of training of employees was increased, and all of the steps required by the *Charter* were initiated.

With the validation of our recent audit, I am very confident that we can continue to work toward a better future and much greater awareness of the problem of sexual abuse, and that we have the right tools in place to accomplish that.

We simply will not tolerate any other course.

In addition to the audit results and in keeping with our policy of openness and candor concerning this issue, this week we also have released publicly local statistics pertaining to the number of clerics accused of sexual misconduct and abuse involving minors dating back more than one-half century -- to 1950 -- and the amount of financial assistance provided to those who filed complaints.

**The Diocese of Rochester reviewed** its records on sexual abuse by clergy as part of a national study on the scope and nature of the problem. The National Review Board, the group that has been asked to monitor the process for the Roman Catholic bishops of the United States, commissioned the study. The study is being conducted under the direction of the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York, which was selected because of its reputation for research and education in the areas of forensic science, criminology and human behavior. The national results of the study, which involves every Diocese, eparchy and religious order in the United States, will be released nationally next month.

Even one case of sexual abuse of a child by a cleric would be one too many. Our local Church must not shirk from these numbers, even as we bear the weight of the hurt they have caused. For knowledge of the past can only help us do more to protect those people who count on us today and in the future.

In our examination of the records, we have determined that:

- A total of 114 allegations were received in the past 53 years. It is interesting to note that more than two-thirds of those, dating back decades, were received in year 2002, at the height of media coverage and public awareness surrounding the issue.
- Over this more than half-century, 1,706 clerics have served within the Diocese of Rochester. Of those, 36 diocesan priests -- or approximately 2 percent -- were the subject of allegations:
- As a result of these complaints, 18 clerics were suspended or resigned.
- Six clerics who were the subject of complaints were deceased by the time the complaints were filed.
- Allegations involving six clerics were unfounded.
- The cases against six clerics had insufficient information or were not substantiated.
- We have never received a complaint about any priest ordained after 1980. We attribute this fact to more rigid screening and training, increased awareness and other changes imposed in that time period and since.
- The Diocese has provided a total of approximately \$1.51 million in financial assistance and other payments relating to sexual misconduct on the part of clergy. Of that figure, approximately \$1.24 million was for treatment, compensation or payment to victims. Legal fees totaled approximately \$270,000. Insurance paid approximately \$831,000 of the total. For perspective, it is noteworthy that the diocesan insurance program paid a total of \$12.5 million in one 10-year period (1992-2002) for property damage, personal liability, workers compensation and related items. Money raised through the Partners in Faith capital campaign has not been used for any such payments.

We have learned so much as a Church -- and as a society -- about this issue over time. Many people may have forgotten that, until the 1980s, pedophilia was viewed as a treatable psychiatric disorder. We relied on psychiatric experts to advise on whether an afflicted priest could serve in ministry again. But studies conducted by a religious order in the mid-1980s determined that the disorder was, in fact, not treatable. As a result, we cannot and will not place an offender back in ministry.

Despite extensive and ongoing national media attention, I must also tell you that it would be an equally tragic mistake for the community to think that the issue of sexual abuse and misconduct involving children is solely a "Catholic Church problem."

**In American society and, indeed,** throughout the world, the problem of sexual abuse of children is widespread, very real and very disturbing. According to the well-respected National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, one in five girls and one in 10 boys in America will be sexually abused by the time they reach adulthood. A 1990 study stated that 27 percent of

women and 16 percent of men had been sexually abused by age 16. Many experts agree that the true ratio for boys is likely higher, but that a higher percentage of males are reluctant to report the abuse.

One of the reasons the other Catholic bishops of the United States and I sought this national study was to better understand the causes, frequency and context of this issue not only within the Church, but also in the larger American context.

While the problem within the Church is tragic, I also believe we lack a framework in which fully to understand the local and national church numbers as part of the national problem in the larger society. Few, if any, institutions, to my knowledge, have undertaken a study as comprehensive as that conducted by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. I encourage these institutions to conduct similar research and to act accordingly to institute programs of prevention and awareness, if they have not already done so.

As a society, we must act together and with zeal to take whatever steps are necessary to grapple with this problem and create a safe environment for all.

And please rest assured that we will make every effort to achieve that goal in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester.

With every good wish, I remain,

Your Brother In Christ,

+Matthew H. Clark

Bishop of Rochester