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A challenging moment for the Church

By Bishop John T. Folda

In recent weeks we have heard the disturbing news of abuse by leaders of the Church, including a former cardinal and those in Pennsylvania and other places who have served the Church as clergy, religious, and lay employees. And, as you know, we have had cases of abuse in our own diocesan history as well.

I first must acknowledge the suffering of many who have been victims of abuse by clergy and Church personnel. I can only express my sorrow for their suffering and pray for their healing. I am edified by their courage in coming forward to tell their painful stories.

I must express my sadness and revulsion at the sinful acts committed by clergy, Church personnel and volunteers against the faithful – men, women, and children. There is no excuse for such acts, and they bring shame upon us all. No one – including a bishop – should be allowed to abuse the trust placed in them by the faithful.

As you may have heard from my letter read at all Masses several weeks ago, I wish to reiterate my commitment to respond to any allegation of abuse committed by Church personnel. If you have been the victim of abuse, I urge you to contact the Victim Assistance Coordinator of the Diocese of Fargo. As we have done before, the Diocese will continue to report such allegations to civil authorities in accord with the law and respond to the needs of victims in any way we can.

In 2002, new measures were put in place throughout the United States to respond to these incidents, and they have been applied rigorously in our diocese. I commit myself to continued vigilance in assuring the safety of all who are ministered to by the Catholic Church. I will continue to insist on background checks for Church personnel and volunteers, safe environment training for young people and adults, and cooperation with the regular independent audits conducted in every diocese. I will also continue to rely on our diocesan review board of lay experts, who have worked with great integrity to assist me and serve the faithful of our diocese. As outside investigators have noted, these measures have been very effective in preventing abuse and responding to abuses that are reported to us. Even the report from Pennsylvania acknowledges the progress made in protection efforts, and that most of those cases recounted are from many decades ago.

Some have raised questions about the credibility of the Church and its leaders in light of these recent reports, and others have disparaged clergy, religious sisters, and the Catholic faithful in general. While not surprising, such comments are unfortunate and unjust. Despite the failings of some Church leaders and personnel, the Catholic faithful and the vast majority of her clergy have lived their faith with integrity and devotion. We are just as sickened by these misdeeds as everyone else.

We have learned over the past decades that abuse does not occur only within one social class, or in one profession, or in one vocational state. In other words, abuse is not merely a “Catholic” problem. Abuse is a societal problem that afflicts us on all fronts. But this is not a time to point fingers at others, and this is not to excuse the sins and crimes that have been reported. It is merely to put the latest reports in context, and to affirm that our entire society must grapple with the issue. There is no such thing as an acceptable or tolerable rate of abuse; even one act of abuse is absolutely unacceptable, especially among the shepherds of the Church. As a Church, we must live up to an even higher standard, the standard of holiness set by Christ for all his people. And nowhere is this more urgent than among those called to lead and serve God’s people.

The incidents reported show the devastation that comes from sexual abuse, whether that abuse is inflicted on children, women, or men, and we must be ready to confront all aspects of this problem. For instance, the statistics make clear that most of these acts of abuse were homosexual in nature, and we must be willing to admit the disorder and sinfulness of homosexual behavior. But any sexual activity

outside of marriage is contrary to God's law, and all these incidents of abuse are a sign of our need to return to the full moral teaching of the Gospel.

There is an axiom attributed to St. Augustine that says *Ecclesia semper reformanda*, i.e., "the Church must always be reformed." In this moment of history, we can see the truth of that statement. The Church does need purification, and always has. The Church is the Body of Christ, and is holy by that very fact. But the Church, including her shepherds, is made up of sinners who constantly need repentance and mercy. So, in spite of the sins that have been uncovered at this time, we move forward, confident in the power of God to bring grace even into the most painful experiences.

In the face of these sad stories, we must not become discouraged or disheartened. We should not allow these stories, horrific as they are, to undermine the way we live our faith. As disciples of Jesus Christ, and members of his Church, we need to continue the life of prayer and penance that he has called us to. We must continue the hard work of conversion that is always necessary in our own lives and in the life of the Church. And we should never doubt that Jesus himself is still with us, offering his grace and guiding his followers through the most challenging of times. To quote Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "The more she is buffeted by storms, the more I am reminded that the Church's firm foundation is Jesus Christ. The failures of men cannot diminish the light of the Gospel. Lord, by the help of your mercy, show us the way to salvation."

With all my fellow clergy and those who work on behalf of the Church, I renew my commitment to the well-being of all our people, and my determination to protect the flock of our Lord from those who would do them harm. We will continue our work of worship and prayer, evangelization, education of the young, service to the poor, the sick, and the elderly, and advocacy for the common good. The tragedy of abuse may place obstacles in our path, but we will not allow these wrongdoers to deter us from carrying out the mission given to us by Christ. And we will certainly continue to pray and work for healing in the Church and in our society.