

PulledQuote: “With God’s grace, I pray that we will be freed from this stain on the Church and move forward with living the Gospel of Christ. Please pray with me for these intentions.” – Bishop John Folda

Headline: Steps toward healing

For the past year, we have heard more revelations of clergy abuse of minors in the Church, including abuse committed by bishops. With good reason many of the faithful have expressed sadness, frustration, and anger at these sins of the shepherds of our Lord’s flock. But some concrete steps have now been taken to increase our vigilance and strengthen our efforts to prevent the evil of sexual abuse by bishops who have betrayed the flock entrusted to them.

The bishops of the United States met last November and again in June to consider measures that must be taken to confront this crisis. As a body, we recognize that bishops, like all our priests, must be accountable for instances of sexual abuse of minors, or the intentional mishandling of such cases. In the aftermath of the Theodore McCarrick case, this became even more urgent.

Pope Francis also called the presidents of national bishops’ conferences around the world to a special meeting last February to consider this grave issue and the steps that must be taken to address it. He made it very clear that this is an issue not only for the United States but for the worldwide Church. Following this gathering, Pope Francis issued a document in May called *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* (“You are the Light of the World”). In this document, he made changes in Church law to establish a mandatory process for investigations of complaints *against bishops* (not just priests and deacons) for sexual abuse of a minor or vulnerable adult, and for mishandling of such abuse or harassment cases. It mandates reporting of all such allegations, offers protection for those who make reports, and it reiterates that bishops are subject to the universal law of the Church that forbids sexual abuse.

Following this action of Pope Francis, the bishops of the United States overwhelmingly approved three documents that implement our Holy Father’s instructions on reporting and investigating claims of abuse by bishops. The first sets protocols and restrictions on former bishops who were removed or resigned their office for reasons of sexual abuse or intentional mishandling of such cases. Another reaffirms the commitment of bishops to place themselves under the same high standards of the Gospel applied to priests, deacons, and lay personnel. This commits bishops to the same requirements of the “Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People” (commonly known as the “Dallas Charter”), which was adopted in 2002 in response to the clergy abuse crisis. And the last document deals specifically with the reporting and investigation of complaints against bishops. It puts into effect the mandate of Pope Francis that all such allegations must be reported and referred to the local metropolitan archbishop, or a senior bishop in the region if the claim is against the archbishop himself. The Holy See is also notified of any such allegations, so no complaints can be brushed off or covered up.

The bishops also approved the establishment of a national third-party phone and online system that receives reports of abuse violations by bishops. Currently, complaints against bishops can go to law enforcement, the diocesan chancery, or directly to the nuncio, the Pope’s representative. When it becomes active in the upcoming year, this third-party system, or “hotline,” will supplement these existing avenues and will facilitate the process for gathering and reporting complaints of sexual abuse.

One key point in these decisions involves the role of the laity. The Pope explicitly permits the use of lay experts who would be free from any conflict of interest. The bishops go further and state that they are “committed, when we receive or when we are authorized to investigate such cases to include the counsel of lay men and women whose professional backgrounds are indispensable.” Lay men and women have served on diocesan review boards since 2002, and now their expertise and experience will be especially valuable in potential cases involving bishops. The participation of laity in these investigations will add credibility and transparency to the process as well.

Pope Francis wrote to all the bishops of the United States in January that the consequences of abuse and our failures to respond to it cannot be solved by being mere administrators of new programs and committees. They can only be resolved by humility, listening, self-examination, and conversion. I can

state without hesitation that I and my brother bishops are determined to address any acts of abuse in light of Christ's command that we are to be true shepherds who protect the flock entrusted to us. I am hopeful that these important measures will close the gap that allowed abuses to go unreported and uncorrected.

I reported in my April column that I intend to release the names of those clergy in our diocese who have substantiated claims of abuse against minors in their background. I can tell you that we have been reviewing hundreds of files for many months, and we are now in the final stretch. Once the review is complete, I will offer the findings to all the faithful in the hope that the suffering of victims will be acknowledged and that we as a diocese will experience the purification of God's healing grace.

As I have said before, even one act of abuse is too many, and the Church must be always vigilant to prevent any such act from happening again. Sin has been in the world since the Fall of Adam and Eve, and we will continue to struggle with sin despite the best training and programs. Our work is to live out a spirit of holiness and to ensure the best preventive measures and remedies for sin, in whatever form it takes. The good news is that the number of reported abuses by clergy has plummeted in recent decades, and they have become extremely rare in recent years, especially after the measures adopted in the "Dallas Charter" of 2002. With God's grace, I pray that we will be freed from this stain on the Church and move forward with living the Gospel of Christ. Please pray with me for these intentions.