



Dear brothers and sisters,

In this weekend's gospel, Jesus tells us the painful story of a rich man who day after day chose to ignore the suffering of a poor man named Lazarus on his own doorstep. Jesus is warning us urgently: Be careful! To repeatedly choose to turn off your heart in response to another's suffering digs a gaping chasm of isolation around it! A chasm you won't be able to cross when you want to! Indeed, silence and ignoring seem innocuous, but are deadly dangerous habits of mind and heart, and they have no place among the free children of God. In this spirit, we, the priests and principals of the Nativity community, want to look directly at some painful sores that cover the suffering members of the Church, choosing not to ignore them, but treat them in openness and shared purpose. The sores are those of child sexual abuse by men of the clergy, as well as the further squandering of trust by ordained and lay leaders who did nothing.

We want to be absolutely clear that this weekend was not prompted by any case of abuse in our community. Thanks be to God, and thanks to the courageous commitment of Nativity members, we remain a place where our children are fiercely protected with shared paternal and maternal zeal. Nevertheless, it takes ongoing attention to cultivate this atmosphere of freedom and shared responsibility that makes this community safe. To be blunt, as human beings we need frequent reminders to be watchful and we need support to revive that protective instinct that rises whenever we encounter a situation that carries risk. "Not in *our* house" should be the shared impulse we rally around. This need for re-encouragement is what prompted this weekend.

Frankly, this parish conversation should have happened much sooner. Particularly as the hierarchical crisis continued to unfold last year, we were all searching for a response and a reform. The American bishops began a response, but were told to wait for a global set of reforms, much to our disappointment and frustration. We wish this weekend could include the news that there are significant canonical reforms to enforce the strictest accountability of our top governance, but that is deplorably still not the case. Nevertheless, it is still good to have this conversation now, as a parish, because, regardless of our confidence in the prudence of the global church leadership, we can choose to do our part to enforce here, in our community, the freedom and common sense that leaves no room even for abusive attitudes, let alone actions. Where good people stand with *common commitments* and the *freedom and courage to speak*, we see an ongoing elimination of the conditions where abuse could occur.

We have seen this happen already. The leadership team at Nativity – clergy, principals, trustees, and faith formation director – is blessed with complete ease and unity in speaking about the safety of our community, and proactively assessing new realities that emerge. We have had a front-row seat to *see the effectiveness of a free and committed community*. We want to share some of the examples we have seen over the past years that indicate our policies *work* in real-time:

- 1) We noticed that, to work as a team, we needed a common language to articulate our shared commitments. Thus, we instituted mandatory professional training and background checks for *all* staff members and volunteers who have direct interaction with children or vulnerable adults. This training program ("Virtus") makes it second nature to have a watchful eye for unhealthy behaviors, and the shared vocabulary and criteria allow us to hold each other accountable in freedom and fraternity.
- 2) We found that when levels of authority or responsibility were unclear, we naturally are more hesitant to speak up, especially about smaller procedural infractions. Thus, we developed clear lines of communication and reporting. These encourage and incentivize bringing up concerns about even potentially risky situations or structures. This need created the "Safe Environment Coordinator" position, giving us a direct contact-person for concerns.
- 3) We realized that, all too easily, the respect, reverence, and unqualified trust due to God alone can be transferred, even unconsciously, to clergy. If you ever have felt that it is "disloyal" or "disobedient" or "rebellious" or "working against the team" to question a priest's behavior or decisions, either in person or to someone else in authority, please destroy that lie *today!* Our shared commitments to our children apply to *all*, and any priest who willingly compromises them, in the words of our Lord, would be better off in the sea with a millstone around his neck. Two concrete ways the clergy have expressly worked against this mindset is first, to repeat that we work *only in partnership* with a child's parents, teachers, and guardians. There is nothing we say or do that is not public and shareable. We do not "pull kids aside" to have a personal talk. Even in a sacred place like confession, the seal of secrecy is only for the priest (he cannot tell your sins). But there is nothing told in secrecy to the penitent. Confession is the gift of freedom to "live in the light," and we want to communicate this message of living in the light consistently and clearly. This is one reason we decided that children receiving the sacrament of

reconciliation may not use the face-to-face confessional, but are directed to the screen-side only. It is also why we have carefully planned the timing of the altar server and sacristy public areas so that there are always three or more people present. These may sound like small steps, but it is the cumulative effect of these details that create a natural, healthy mindset and maturity in our community. If our actions ever do not correspond to this message, we sincerely want you to bring it to our attention! Again, it takes the shared commitment of the whole community for this atmosphere of freedom and courage to thrive.

These are the types of real conversations the Nativity leadership is having and will continue to have. What are the policies and principles that drive these conversations? They are simply the “best practices,” that you are probably already familiar with, since they usually match basic common sense. Nevertheless, it is good to reiterate them because it fosters our unity in this mission. By speaking these commitments aloud, we hope that you are completely comfortable holding *anyone* in our community to these standards, and if you ever believe they are not followed, please bring it up:

- At Nativity...
- We consistently encourage complete honesty with parents and teachers. No secrets.
 - We simply do not conduct one-on-one conversations without close monitoring.
 - We insist on adult behavior from adults, rather than childish jokes or banter.
 - We do not allow staff or official volunteers to pay special attention to any one child.

These commitments are to be actively conscious in all our minds as we participate in this community. They are part of what make us free to be healthy and mature. Even if the habits take effort to cultivate and might feel artificial at first, when internalized, they actually become second-nature and allow true relationships to thrive. Let’s get practical. We want you to be comfortable with our procedures should a concern ever arise.

Who should I report concerns to, and what will happen?

If you have a concern about an event procedure, staff member, or volunteer pertaining to the parish, bring it to Katie Schaitberger, our Safe Environment Coordinator. If it concerns a school event or person, report to Principal Kate Wollan. They are responsible for enforcing our parish and archdiocesan policies and resolving any non-compliance with the parties involved. If your concern involves the clergy, bring it to the Safe Environment Coordinator and the parish trustees, who are not employed by the parish. Lastly, if you have a direct case of abuse to report, your first call is 911 or Child Protective Services. If any such case of sexual abuse, regardless of its credibility, comes to the attention of our staff, we are not only mandated by law to report it immediately to civil authorities, but our own job positions and consciences require it.

Where can I find these policies and procedures?

We are in the process of constructing a new parish policy page on our website. This is not just a bureaucratic shift. We hope it signals real transparency and shared responsibility in our parish governance. You will be hearing more about this when we hold our “Parish Mission Statement” weekend in October and hear from the Pastoral Council. For now, know that on the website you will find not only parish and archdiocesan safe environment policies, but also items like the agenda of the Pastoral and Finance Councils, contact information, and policies of all kinds, including funerals and weddings, alcohol use, mass intentions policies, etc. You can also expect additional follow-up from us about the promising archdiocesan reforms that are being enacted to insure clergy accountability.

Why should I keep my family in the Church if I have little confidence in its human administration?

None of us can pretend that the credibility of clergy doesn’t affect us. Ultimately, if the witnesses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ who are tasked with serving God’s people contradict the law written on every human heart, it deeply cripples our ability to pass on the faith to our own children, let alone the world. It is right to wonder “what do my children pick up from this?” Is it right to stay? We believe it *is* right to stay, because your children will learn what kind of God we have: one who *chooses* to share His life and mission with us even when we fail. And they will learn what it means to be part of the solution. In trying to grapple with this mystery, we want to give you this book by Bishop Robert Barron, the small profits of which are going to trusted third-party funds for victims of sexual abuse. We hope it might offer hope that God’s mission continues and that real lives are being saved and improved by His work in the Church even through the darkness that we are committed to eradicate. It is in fact in the eradication that miracles continue to happen. May the Lord’s miracles continue to fill Nativity as we recommit our pledge to our children: “Not in *our* house.”


Fr. Patrick Hipwell
Pastor


Fr. Nick Hagen
Parochial Vicar


Kate Wollan
Principal


Sandy Kane
Assistant Principal


Katie Schaitberger
Director of Faith Formation