



**Reflection on Court Decision in Regard to
Sexual Abuse of Minors in Six
Pennsylvania Dioceses**

To the People of God of the Diocese of Amarillo

This past week brought another sad revelation of the extent of the Sexual Abuse of Minors in six of the eight Pennsylvania Catholic Dioceses. It is also embarrassing and scandalous. One case of such abuse is too much; much less hundreds!

“Even though it can be said that most of these cases belong to the past, nonetheless as time goes on we have come to know the pain of many of the victims. We have realized that these wounds are slow to disappear and that they require us forcefully to condemn these atrocities and join forces in uprooting this culture of death.

The extent and the gravity of all that has happened requires coming to grips with this reality in a comprehensive and communal way. It is important and necessary on every journey of conversion to acknowledge the truth of what has happened; it also requires concrete action that leads to healing. Today we are challenged as the People of God to continue to take on the pain of our brothers and sisters wounded in their flesh and in their spirit. If, in the past, the response was slow in coming, today we want solidarity, in the deepest and most challenging sense, to become our way of forging present and future history. And this in an environment where conflicts, tensions and above all the victims of every type of abuse can encounter an outstretched hand to protect them and rescue them from their pain (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 228). Such solidarity demands that we in turn condemn whatever endangers the integrity of any person. A solidarity that summons us to fight all forms of corruption, especially spiritual corruption. The latter is “a comfortable and self-satisfied form of blindness, which is so clearly manifested in our society today. Everything then appears acceptable: deception, slander, egotism and other subtle forms of self-centeredness, for “even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 *Cor.* 11:14) (*Gaudete et Exsultate*, 165). Saint Paul’s exhortation to suffer with those who suffer is the best antidote against all our attempts to repeat the words of Cain: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (*Gen* 4:9). (Pope Francis, Letter: To the People of God, August 19, 2018)

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) responded to this crisis in 1985-6, 1990-91 and most extensively in 2001. The last attempt to end this behavior was the most comprehensive and effective. Prior to the June Meeting of the USCCB each of the then fifteen regional divisions met to offer solutions to this grave concern. At that time I was the Regional Representative from our Region X, composed of Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas; as such I led the discussions that provided our input for the Charter.

Each of these Regions offered its wisdom in regard to arriving at a methodology to end this madness. The wisdom of each region led to the creation of what is now known as ‘The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People’. This led to the ‘Essential Norms’ which put into practice, as Church Law, a procedure for dealing with abusive priests and a program to develop a ‘Safe Environment’ in which neither parents nor children would be at risk for such behavior.

All clergy (priests and deacons), those in training and formation to be clergy, and all lay people who have a continuous presence with children and young people must have a Criminal Background Check and must have attended Safe Environment Training Seminars before they can work or volunteer with activities involving children or young people (minors). These employees and volunteers receive continuous up-dating in regard to their training; Criminal Background checks must be renewed every five years.

In addition, every child must also have training so that they should be able to determine if any adult, clergy or lay person is a possible predator; this includes behaviors that indicate ‘grooming’ a child; being befriended by a stranger who is overly kind, inviting or generous with gifts. Children and Young People must repeat this every year.

Further, if a credible allegation comes to the attention of a given diocese, the family is encouraged to report this to the Civil Authorities. The diocese must notify the civil law-enforcement offices to ensure that the matter is investigated.

I cannot comment on the history of Pennsylvania, I simply do not have any facts; however, the bishops of the USCCB pledged in the Charter to remove any priest from office if there is a credible accusation. He simply will be prevented by Church Law from any form of ministry. As St. Pope John Paul II once said: “One strike and you are out” of ministry.

Many independent sources confirm that as a result of the implementation of the Church’s Charter and accompanying Essential Norms, new allegations (actual present day allegations) of the sexual abuse of minors and young people has dropped dramatically! Most recent accusations occurred years...or even decades ago. This is the case in Pennsylvania. Also, most of the priests in that court decision are now deceased.

As a matter of clarity, the overwhelming number of the abuse of minors occurred many decades ago. The history indicates that such abuse reached its apex in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s. Most of the newly revealed allegations are decades old.

According to the Charter, each diocese must create a Diocesan Review Board which assists the Bishop in creating and maintaining a Safe Environment and also review all allegations of the sexual abuse of minors that come to the diocese. This Board is composed mainly of lay men and women. They offer their wisdom and expertise in these matters. Each diocese must also have a Victim Assistance Coordinator. Sharyn Delgado is the coordinator for the Diocese of Amarillo.

What the Catholic Church has done by creating the Charter and the Essential Norms of Church Law is unprecedented. Safe Environment Training and Criminal Background Checks have become an ordinary part of Church Life. Annual Audits performed by an independent

auditing firm are also part of today's Church Life. Parishes, institutions and all ministries must participate in this. This does not undo the past; however, it does point toward a better future. My great hope is that every institution that includes children and young people would develop and use such methodologies to prevent such horrible events in their own institutions.

However, this is not enough!

“It is essential that we, as a Church, continue to acknowledge and condemn, with sorrow and shame, the atrocities perpetrated by consecrated persons, clerics, and all those entrusted with the mission of watching over and caring for those most vulnerable. Let us beg forgiveness for our own sins and the sins of others. An awareness of sin helps us to acknowledge the errors, the crimes and the wounds caused in the past and allows us, in the present, to be more open and committed along a journey of renewed conversion.

Likewise, penance and prayer will help us to open our eyes and our hearts to other people's sufferings and to overcome the thirst for power and possessions that are so often the root of those evils. May fasting and prayer open our ears to the hushed pain felt by children, young people and the disabled; A fasting that can make us hunger and thirst for justice and impel us to walk in the truth, supporting all the judicial measures that may be necessary. A fasting that shakes us up and leads us to be committed in truth and charity with all men and women of good will, and with society in general, to combating all forms of the abuse of power, sexual abuse and the abuse of conscience.

In this way, we can show clearly our calling to be “a sign and instrument of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race” (*Lumen Gentium*, 1). [Pope Francis, Letter: To the People of God, August 19, 2018]

Therefore, in order to manifest the brightness of Christ among our people and to the world, and diminish the darkness that sin and evil have produced, I am asking a special favor from all our parishioners and others of good will, to enter with me into a period of prayer and fasting. I am humbly asking, with great conviction in the power of prayer, that each Friday from the second Friday of September (September 14, 2018 until the last Friday of November, (November 30, 2018) be a Day of Fasting, Abstinence, and Prayer for Healing and Reconciliation for all victims of sexual abuse of minors.

This is not to be under the penalty of sin; however, as a sign of our solidarity with all victims of abuse and our continued pledge to bring this scourge of evil to an end.

✠ Most Reverend Patrick J. Zurek
Bishop of Amarillo

August 22, 2018
Queenship of the Blessed Virgin Mary