

Pastoral Letter of Bishop John C. Nienstedt

February 2004

At one time in my life, I served in an assignment with a fellow priest who used to say: "Being surprised that the Church is full of sinners is like wondering why an exercise gym is full of overweight people. One exercises to lose weight or keep it off. So, one goes to Church to lose one's sins or keep them off." That home-spun wisdom has always helped me to remember that the Church which Jesus intended to serve as His presence in the world is the very same Church that struggles daily under the burden of human frailty, temptations and, yes, even sin. There are not two Churches, but one: she is what at any moment in history Jesus calls her to be and, at the same time, she struggles to realize that noble call. The very motivation to do penance and undergo conversion is the reason for our hope in God's Kingdom-to-come.

Since January 6, 2002 when the Boston Globe published the files on Boston priests who had abused children and youth, there has been an avalanche of media attention on this issue of clerical sexual abuse as well as allegations that Church officials covered up such evil activity. Evil begets evil and so many bonds of trust have been broken, recriminations engendered and new barriers established among the laity, priests and bishops who are called sacramentally to be united in faith, hope and especially love. As a baptized Catholic and ordained priest and bishop, I have felt embarrassment, anger, disgust and shame as a result of this scandal that has befallen today's Church.

At the same time, we have worked very hard as a Diocese during the past two years to update our policies, to establish programs for Safe Environments, to provide background checks and to train victim assistance personnel to deal with any allegations. On January 6, the findings from an outside audit were announced that covered all but four of the dioceses in the country. Never before had an institution undergone such a comprehensive audit addressing a problem of this kind. Yet the media dismissed the report by saying the bishops had not yet done enough. Such a reaction does not give sufficient credit to all the effort that has already been given to this crisis.

Moreover, I do not know of any bishop who believes we have done enough to resolve this terrible problem. At the end of February, a study covering the last fifty years regarding the scope, effects and causes of clerical sexual abuse, commissioned by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and conducted by an independent agent, the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City, will be released. Our Diocese published the information we sent to John Jay in November's Prairie Catholic. Other dioceses have done the same. But the aggregate numbers of accusations, convictions, victims and settlements over the past fifty years may be startling to read and no doubt will receive much more public attention.

Recently a professor of psychology writing in America magazine (January 5-12, 2004) listed a number of reasons to be hopeful in this otherwise depressing situation. He cited reliable sources that state only two percent of Catholic priests have been involved in this

activity. This percentage is comparable to other occupational groups that supervise or have access to children. While a higher standard of behavior should be expected of priests over other men, nevertheless there is no data to suggest that priests are more likely to be sex offenders than other male groups in the general population.

Another sign of hope was the January 2003 investigation by the New York Times that the majority of clergy accused of sexual misconduct are now about 60 years old and committed their offenses in the 1970's. Reported cases in the late 1980's and 1990's have dropped dramatically. Hopefully this means we are doing a better job of screening and forming contemporary priests.

Again the author found reason for hope in the new national guidelines that the bishops have directed, as well as background checks for volunteers and more comprehensive psychological evaluations for those entering religious life. While these improvements alone will not guarantee the end of sexual abuse, they do reflect a heightened consciousness to the problem and allow for greater openness to reporting any immoral activity.

While I agree that the numbers of the John Jay study will not tell the whole story and that they ought to be understood in a proper context of this present moment, I also believe that the situation must be evaluated in religious, not just sociological terms.

On this point, I concur with Fr. Ron Rolheiser (see info@ronrolheiser.com) who has referred to our present moment in history as a "dark night of the soul." By this he means first of all that, while God is not responsible for the situation, God's pruning hand is at work in it. The religious cause for the crisis is human infidelity to God's revealed plan and, therefore, the solution lies in a thorough purification. Fasting, prayer and penance are the only tools for such a process to be achieved.

Secondly, this crisis according to Rolheiser is the real work of ministry in today's Church. While there are many other essential works to be carried out, this is the evil that has risen up before the world and it must be exorcised. Even though it may cause us to suffer humiliation or be drained of our resources, it is essential that the Church help the world to overcome this evil wherever it exists.

Finally, this moment calls for greater compassion and understanding. Can we love, forgive and reach out to others in a new way? Can we show compassion to both victim and perpetrator? Can we forgive Church leaders who made mistakes? Can we spend our money on paying for someone else's sin? Rolheiser reminds us that the ethical teaching of Jesus is to love not just those who love us, but to love those who have offended us or made life difficult for us. Can we then love as Jesus has taught us to love?

A dark night of the soul is meant to stretch us, teach us and force us to grow in ways that might not otherwise happen. I believe we need to see the religious implications behind the headlines of clerical sexual abuse, especially if we are to be healed of its

transgression. Lent 2004 may be the best time to begin this process. I pray that all of us will be able to accept this challenge.

God bless you!

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