

Day of Prayer for Victims of Abuse
February 27, 2004 – Cathedral of St. Mary
Bishop Samuel J. Aquila

In June of 2002 the bishops of the United States issued *The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*. It was a response to the terrible situation that the Church found herself in for the sexual abuse of minors by members of the clergy. One element of the charter spoke to the importance of the study of the nature and scope of the question so that we might understand the problem over the past 52 years. No other institution in society or in the world has ever commissioned such a self-study. It is a first.

The John Jay College of Criminal Justice was commissioned to do the study and the results were released today. The statistics are tragic. On the one hand, they show the extent of the abuse of minors by clergy. About 4 % of clergy over a 52-year period have allegedly engaged in sexual misconduct with minors. The abuse of one minor by a member of the clergy is bad enough. To hear of 10,600 victims can be overwhelming and truly heartbreaking.

On the other hand, there are hopeful signs, in that it seems from the study that the peak of sexual misconduct was around 1980 and has steadily decreased to our own time.

Response to the problem has increased over the last decade, and new safeguards are in place. Victims' advocates exist within each diocese and each diocese, our own for several years, has a lay review board.

To the victims of sexual misconduct by clergy, I again apologize to you for what has happened to you. My heart aches for you in the suffering and hurt you have incurred. I continue to pray for your healing. I want victims to know that I am willing to meet with you who wish to meet with me so that I may personally apologize to you and help you in the healing process. This is true for the parents of victims.

I am convinced, as a bishop, that the only one who can bring healing to any victim of sexual abuse, be it by a member of the clergy, be it by a member of one's family, be it by a teacher, a coach, a doctor, be it by a stranger, the only one who can bring true healing is Jesus Christ and the love of God. How then do we respond as Church today, on this day that I have called for prayer for the healing of victims of sexual abuse?

First, as Church, we are called to insure the proper protection, diligence, and reporting of any type of sexual misconduct. We must cooperate with civil authorities. We must be held and hold others accountable for their actions. We, in our schools and in our parishes, wherever we work with young people, must always report any type of sexual misconduct we suspect, be it by clergy, by parents, by relatives, or by strangers. If we hear of it, we must report it for the safeguarding of our young people. To those who are victims, we must provide counsel, and justice for them. We must reach out to them.

A victim's advocate office has been established in our own diocese to help victims who have been abused by clergy to come forward. In the time since he has been announced, he has received three calls and all three have been fully investigated.

A second response for us is to respond to the call to holiness, to respond to the call that is given to us by Jesus Christ in the Gospel, and that is to be faithful to Him. In the John Jay study it speaks of the moral laxity of some bishops in responding to this problem. We as a society have gone through tremendous changes in the 60s, the 70s, and 80s. Some bishops responded to that and they became lax as society became lax. They have been influenced by society and not by the Gospel. We are called to return to the Gospel. We are called to stand for the moral teachings as given to us by Jesus Christ. We can never be lukewarm on the teachings of the Church, on the teachings of Jesus that are so clear within the Gospel. Each and every one of us must respond to the call to holiness, to live as Christ lived. That means for us, too, that we must embrace the truth, the meaning and the dignity of human sexuality which is grounded in the inherent dignity of the human person.

Quite honestly, for me as a bishop, the last two and a half years have been tremendously challenging in addressing this problem. I have had to learn and study areas that I never knew really existed. You would hear about the problem at times but not know the depth of the problem. As I have had to review some of our older cases, I have been baffled at times by what the psychiatrists have stated in some of the cases. I have been baffled by their response that there is no problem with this perpetrator, that after a six-month program he is fine and can be returned to a parish. I have spoken with psychiatrists who have told me that they, too, have had to increase their learning and their understanding of

this problem over the years. Not one of us can ever be motivated by moral laxity, but we must be motivated by the truth of the Gospel and live the call to holiness.

Third, we as a Catholic people must also teach clearly and unequivocally about sin. Sin is a reality that exists. Evil is a reality that exists, and the evil one, quite honestly, has had a field day in the life of some priests. We as bishops, as priests, and as laity must stand for the clear teaching of the Church. We cannot waffle on issues. Our society may look at us askance and that is fine. They did no less to Jesus Christ. But we must be faithful to His teaching, no matter what the cost. Jesus Christ taught about sin and condemned it and we must do no less.

Every type of sexual misconduct with a minor is always sinful, no matter whom the perpetrator is. What makes it a greater sin when committed by clergy, more heinous and scandalous, is that we as Catholics believe that when a priest is ordained he is ordained to act in the person of Christ the Head – in the person of Christ the Head. That has been the consistent teaching of the Church. It is horrific to think that a priest would bring Jesus Christ into that sin with a child, with a minor, and that is what makes it so much more heinous and evil. For in every act of misconduct, Christ Himself has been brought into the act. That is why at times it takes victims so much time to heal and recover, because it is a man who is trusted—a man who is the sacramental representation of Jesus Christ, a man who represents God—who commits the sin. The brokenness is grave and we must recognize that brokenness if there is to be healing.

This brokenness brings me to the fourth point, and that is the call to forgiveness and conversion. At the heart of the Gospel message is the call to conversion and forgiveness. Every time we pray the prayer, “The Our Father”, taught to us by Jesus, we pray the words, “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” My sisters and brothers note carefully that “*as*”. Do we believe it? Do we live it?

On Ash Wednesday evening, I saw the movie, "The Passion of the Christ." In the movie, quoting the Gospel, Jesus spoke the words, “Father, forgive them,” words that must also be spoken by us. To the victims of sexual misconduct, by clergy or by others, forgiveness is at the heart of the healing process and it is by far the hardest task of all. In forgiveness one must always separate the act from the person. The act is always evil, the act is always heinous, and the act cannot be taken away or removed. The act must always be condemned, but the person, if there is to be healing, must be forgiven. That is true in every type of hurt experienced by a human being, even one as serious as sexual abuse. That is why I believe that it is only Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit who is able to bring that type of healing.

All of us know when we are hurt, the anger we experience. That anger is justified. The anger is justified by the victims of sexual abuse. But if anger leads to vengeance, to holding grudges, to a lack of forgiveness of the person, it will only brood and continue to wound. Forgiveness is essential and is at the heart of the Gospel. We as Church must help our people to understand forgiveness. We ourselves must forgive. Forgiveness never removes justice. Forgiveness never takes away the importance of reporting.

Forgiveness includes removal from active ministry, but we also must recognize that healing will only occur when we forgive the person. At times, we cannot do that on our own. We must place ourselves in the heart of Jesus and utter with Him the words, “Father, forgive them.”

Finally, we as a society, we as a Church, must also speak to the conversion of society. We must put the sexual abuse of minors by clergy into context. When all of this broke in 2002, a psychiatrist from the University of North Dakota came and spoke with me. He said “Bishop, the media has focused in on Catholic clergy. But,” he said, “this is only a tiny portion and percentage of the number of cases of sexual misconduct in our society today. There are some estimates that go as high as one hundred to two hundred thousand cases a year of sexual abuse and misconduct.” That is frightening. There are statistics that point to one in every four women being sexually abused. Those statistics are staggering.

As a society we must look at how we live and how we treat human sexuality. We must recognize that there is a truth, a meaning, and a dignity to human sexual intimacy, in which, based on the truth, meaning and dignity, it belongs only in marriage and marriage alone. As Catholics, do we accept that teaching and are we willing to present it to society?

A bishop friend once stated to me, “We live in a society that tolerates everything, and forgives nothing.” There is truth in the statement. We live in a society that tolerates

every type of sexual misconduct and deviancy among adults. Women and men are treated as sexual objects and toys for one another. We live in a society that at times will close its eyes to the sexual abuse problem that exists in families and in schools. As a Catholic people we must call society to conversion. As a bishop, I believe one of the great goods that can come out of this very real evil, is a sensitization of all peoples to the problem of the sexual abuse of minors. We as Church must continue in the work that we began in the late 1980s and today continue with the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People. We must insure that no child is abused. We must insure and keep the safeguards in place that protect our young people. We must continue to reflect upon this subject, as unpleasant as it is, for it calls us to conversion, forgiveness and faithfulness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It calls us to holiness.

In our reading today from the book of the prophet Isaiah, God speaks to the people about the darkness in which they live and He speaks to them to leave that darkness. He calls them back to His light. “If you remove from your midst oppression, false accusation, and malicious speech, if you bestow your bread on the hungry and satisfy the afflicted, the light shall rise for you in the darkness.” That light is Jesus Christ. The light that we are called to is Christ and to living in relationship with Him, in living in the love of the Father. We are told that our Lord will guide you always. He will renew your strength. Jesus Christ is the one that we must turn to always in this type of crisis. We must be a people who live the call to holiness, who live the call to conversion. We cannot be lukewarm. We cannot be lax. We must be faithful.

As I watched "The Passion of the Christ" on Ash Wednesday, I viewed the passion through the eyes of Mary. She stands watching all of the violence of the Cross happening to her beloved Son. What struck me as I watched were her strength, her suffering, and her forgiveness. As I prayed this morning for the victims of sexual abuse by clergy I placed them under the mantel of Mary, our Mother, seeking her intercession for them, seeking her forgiveness, seeking her strength for them and her faith, for she, too, can bring healing for them. She, too, has watched her Son suffer in every act of abuse committed by clergymen. My sisters and brothers, let us, too, turn to the intercession of Mary and seek her prayers for the healing of all victims of sexual abuse.

May all of us grow in faithfulness in living the Gospel. May we hear the words of Jesus from the Cross, "Father, forgive them," and may we live that message each day and speak those words with Him from the depths of our hearts.