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Bishop Aquila addresses commitment to provide pastoral outreach to victims of abuse

A slightly edited version of this letter to the editor written by Bishop Samuel Aquila was printed in the Dec. 22, 2009 issue of The Forum newspaper, Fargo. It is reprinted in its entirety here.

From time to time, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP) issues a press release that is critical of the manner in which the Diocese of Fargo has addressed its response to individuals who allege abuse by clergy decades ago. Because our public statements in response are sometimes reduced to a one-line quote, I would like to more fully communicate to readers, hopefully for the last time, where I, as the current Bishop of Fargo, stand on the subject of the abuse of children, sexual misconduct of any kind, and the Church's pastoral outreach.

No form of child abuse or sexual misconduct of any kind is now nor ever was considered acceptable within the Church. I and my staff are committed to this truth. Under my leadership, since 2001, the Diocese has taken numerous positive steps to ensure that a safe environment pervades each and every one of our parishes, schools and affiliated institutions. We have worked hard to ensure that anyone in the Diocese of Fargo who has knowledge of or suspects child abuse understands his or her duty to make a full report to all appropriate authorities as required by North Dakota law.

For several years, the Diocese has regularly provided the information needed to report any harm or injustice that may have been inflicted on a child. This information is readily available in each parish and Catholic institution within the Diocese. In addition, notices are published in the diocesan newspaper, New Earth, and on the diocesan Web site (www.fargodiocese.org) inviting anyone to contact civil authorities as well as the Diocese to report incidents or suspected incidents of child abuse, including sexual abuse, involving clergy or church workers.

In addition to complying with child abuse reporting obligations, the Catholic Church of Fargo is equally committed to providing pastoral outreach to anyone who has experienced inappropriate sexual behavior by any member of the clergy, a teacher, employee or other church worker. Briston Fernandes, Victim Assistance Coordinator, and our Vicar General, Monsignor Joseph Goering, are available to help. *(Note to readers: Briston Fernandes retired effective Jan. 15. Larry Bernhardt is the new Victim Assistance Coordinator.)*

When an individual reports wrongful conduct of any kind, regardless of the age of the reporter, it is and will continue to be our policy to work with civil authorities as required while, at the same time, respecting the privacy of those who come forward. For a variety of reasons, most do not seek publicity and specifically reject the idea of becoming the object of public attention. The Diocese respects their desire for privacy and remains committed to protecting that privacy. We believe this policy is wise and encourages all to bring their complaints to the attention of the Diocese. We will not succumb to entreaties to discuss publicly that which was disclosed to us in confidence.

By honoring an individual's desire for privacy, the Diocese's ability to respond publicly on these sensitive issues is necessarily limited. At times, our pledge of confidentiality to those with the courage to report is used against the Diocese. Despite those injustices, I will not violate the trust of anyone who makes a report to us.

Over the years, the Diocese has provided counseling and other assistance to those who have credible claims of being abused sexually prior to adulthood. On behalf of the Church, I have personally apologized to those who have come forward and explained to me what happened when they were teens or younger. The scourge of child abuse is an abomination, regardless of circumstances. The Diocese does not trumpet whom we have assisted. At the same time, the Diocese fully acknowledges that nothing it does can ever bring complete healing to any victim. I am prepared to assist with any healing I can offer, understanding that only Christ can provide true healing to any person affected by any sin.

The Faithful of the Diocese of Fargo are aware of our commitments to each of them to provide a safe environment for their children in the Diocese of Fargo. My staff and I will always seek to provide pastoral outreach to any victim.

Sincerely Yours in Christ,

Most Rev. Samuel J. Aquila
Bishop of the Diocese of Fargo