



13 August 2018

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

My prayers today are with the victims of abuse at the hands of clergy worldwide, particularly those represented in the grand jury report in Pennsylvania. The allegations contained in that report, as well as recent allegations of sinful behavior involving former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick – regardless of when and where they happened – are daunting tests of faith for you in the Church, her leadership and our ongoing efforts towards abuse prevention and response.

To begin, be assured that I am one with you in lamenting all of the hurt and pain caused by these moral failures – failures by those who have committed sins against chastity and failures by those who ought to have used their authority to prevent these acts, respond so as to help heal the wounds inflicted, and to ensure that the perpetrators lost their positions of authority. I have met with victim-survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation, and have heard firsthand of the grave harm they have suffered. I continue to pray for them, with confidence that because of the death and rising of Christ, no evil is beyond his healing power.

I acknowledge, too, how disheartening it is for us once again to come face-to-face with moral failures in the priesthood, especially among us bishops. I realize how discouraging it is that we have not decisively overcome these sins after all these years. These sins are marks of shame upon the Church and a great weight impeding the progress we strive so zealously to make in advancing the Lord's Kingdom. In order to find a graced-ray of guiding light in the gloom, I have returned to the 23 April 2002 address of St. John Paul II to the cardinals of the United States during the height of the abuse crisis. Now, as much as then, these words of this great pope and pastor ring true, and so I share them here:

*It must be absolutely clear to the Catholic faithful, and to the wider community, that Bishops and superiors are concerned, above all else, with the*

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*spiritual good of souls. People need to know that there is no place in the priesthood and religious life for those who would harm the young.*

Shortly after the Holy Father affirmed this principle, the Catholic bishops in the United States joined together to create and implement *The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, a set of norms designed to ensure the safety of the most vulnerable in our communities. Today, our Archdiocese of Detroit requires safe environment training programs for clergy, employees, volunteers and children. When allegations of wrongdoing surface, we report them to local police, fully cooperate with their investigations and, in the case of substantiated reports, publicize the names of those accused. In addition, we encourage those who have been abused to come forward, and stress there are no deadlines or restrictions on bringing a complaint to us. Be it five, fifteen, or 50 years later, our diocese accepts and responds to all reports.

This summer's news reports affirm why we – as bishops priests, Church representatives and lay people – must be ever vigilant to protect children from abuse and must re-double our efforts of outreach and healing to those most harmed by sexual abuse. I remain fully committed to this goal. We can never become complacent with what has been accomplished.

Similarly, in the light of reports about former Cardinal McCarrick's sins against chastity, I affirm that priests who try to live a double life by "cheating on the Church" through impure relations with others need to repent or to give up their pastoral office. I am committed to helping all our bishops, priests and deacons cultivate those habits which reinforce their commitments to lives of holiness, and holding them accountable for maintaining the virtue of chastity.

Likewise, I acknowledge that I, too, am accountable for living up to my commitment to celibacy. To that end, it is essential that I adhere to my habits of prayer and asceticism, especially regular Confession and spiritual direction. In standing before Christ's judgment, I humbly give an accounting for myself, acknowledging my weaknesses and asking for pardon and healing. Were I to lapse in my chastity, I should be corrected not only by those in authority over me, but by any brother or sister who had knowledge of my fall.

My response to those who break their vows of chastity is to resort to the medicine of the Gospel: a call to repentance and renewal, using all the supernatural and natural remedies at our disposal for repairing moral failure. As your bishop, I recommit to preserve and advance the life of celibate chastity in the life of our priests, for their sake and for the good of the whole Christian community. If you cannot trust us, we cannot serve you.

In the course of his remarks in 2002, St. John Paul also called upon us bishops to be clear in teaching the whole of the good news of Christ on matters of sexual morality. He pointed out that this is an essential condition for renewal:

*They [the faithful] must know that Bishops and priests are totally committed to the fullness of Catholic truth on matters of sexual morality, a truth as essential to the renewal of the priesthood and the episcopate as it is to the renewal of marriage and family life.*

Here, in this address to you, I renew my resolve to be the sort of good shepherd I hear St. John Paul calling for me to be. I owe that not only to you and to the Church, but to Christ himself. The message handed on to us from the apostles about the norms for chaste living is of one piece, an integrated whole. To cover over, not to mention dissenting from, one part of Christ's vision for chaste living is to weaken every other dimension of that sexual purity Christ demands of his followers. The new Adam is one in all his parts.

Weak teaching about the demands of the Christian life makes it easier for us to lapse into vice, and thus pushes us toward personal and communal shipwreck. While policies and best practices are necessary, we will never be able to create, as T.S. Eliot once put it, "systems so perfect that no one will need to be good." Nothing can replace the need for each of us to strive for personal holiness in our sexuality. I know this, and am resolved to do my part by my teaching and leading as Christ expects.

This seems to be an appropriate place for me to affirm to you, as part of my accounting of my stewardship of the leadership of our local Church, my endorsement of what Cardinal DiNardo, as the President of our Bishops' Conference, wrote on 1 August:

*The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops will pursue the many questions surrounding Archbishop McCarrick's conduct to the full extent of its authority; and where that authority finds its limits, the Conference will advocate with those who do have the authority. One way or the other, we are determined to find the truth in this matter.*

We must give an accounting for the failures that have occurred. While policies and best practices are never substitutes for moral integrity and virtue, they are nonetheless necessary. They do much to protect the vulnerable and to create clarity about what needs to happen when things go wrong. We bishops must look honestly at how this situation unfolded, and I want you to know that I am committed to joining my brother bishops in seeing this work through.

Even with our renewed prayers and support for our dedicated priests and deacons, I note a temptation to despair among some over whether things can change. However, we know that reform can only happen when hope lives. We must move forward with the conviction that God will not abandon his Church. He wants her purified, cleansed of these sins and brought to new life. St. John Paul II concluded his 2002 discourse with these words of encouragement:

*We must be confident that this time of trial will bring a purification of the entire Catholic community, a purification that is urgently needed if the Church is to preach more effectively the Gospel of Jesus Christ in all its liberating force. Now you must ensure that where sin increased, grace will all the more abound. So much pain, so much sorrow must lead to a holier priesthood, a holier episcopate, and a holier Church.*

By the power of the risen Christ, this hour of darkness is a moment to anticipate the dawn. We are called to cooperate with the Holy Spirit to turn what could deflect us from the work of the new evangelization into an opportunity to proclaim the Lordship of Christ over all sin – yes, even these sins of which we are so painfully aware in these days.

Please pray for me, that I may be a good pastor and that God's power will be made perfect in the weaknesses and shortcomings I bring to my ministry. Know also that I pray each day for you, that you might find peace and light in these difficult times.

Fraternally yours in Christ,

The Most Reverend Allen H. Vigneron  
Archbishop of Detroit