

Dear Friends in Christ:

Soon we will be entering into the Season of Lent. It is a fitting time for us to meditate on the sufferings of the Lord and the present suffering of the Church and her people. These past few years have been a time of great crisis and sadness for the Church as it has dealt with the reality of sexual abuse of children by some priests. No group has suffered more than the victims of these crimes. What has happened to them is an unimaginable crime and it is, in truth, a symbol of the evil in our society.

Since coming to the Diocese of Jackson in March 2003 as Bishop, I have tried to build on the work done by my predecessor, Bishop William Houck. I have made creating a safe environment for our children a high priority of my ministry.

The scandals of the past two years have been very difficult for our Church. Many, including myself, have found themselves reacting to the seemingly daily reports of abuse with feelings of hurt, anger, embarrassment, and betrayal.

The sins of a few have seriously damaged the trust that must exist between bishops and priests, bishops and the laity and between priests and their parishioners. However, the overriding number of priests and bishops have faithfully served God's holy people and lived a life of dedicated service to God and the Church. I am indeed grateful for their good example and know that you join me in thanking them for their priestly service and pledging our prayerful support of them in the priesthood.

Great and long-lasting harm is perpetrated by sexual abuse. When that abuse comes from a priest, the harm is all the greater. I apologize to all those who have been victimized, either directly or indirectly, by priests who have abused children. I am aware of the devastation that has been wrought by this terrible problem – for victims, for priests and for all Catholics. I remain committed to healing those wounds and to do whatever is necessary to see that this does not happen again. As we move forward, I hope to maintain openness with you. I want to hear from anyone who has questions, comments or concerns.

To help restore the bonds of trust and communion, I present this report on where the Diocese of Jackson stands in this national scandal and our response to it.

I know that many of you have questions about the number of allegations, clergy involved and amount of money that might have been expended by the Diocese of Jackson in relation to sexual abuse. Therefore, included in these pages is a summary of our diocese's history since 1950, including the number of diocesan priests accused and the monies paid. This report also details the steps being taken in the Diocese of Jackson to prevent any future incidents of abuse.

A national report commissioned by the U.S. Bishops on the scope of the problem of sexual abuse in our Church will be released next Friday, Feb. 27. The national report was conducted by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. Because the national report will only give aggregate numbers for the Church in the United States, I wanted to release our diocesan statistics to you so that you may know where we as a diocese stand.

I promised you transparency in our communications regarding allegations of sexual abuse. I will keep that promise while respecting the rights of victims and the accused and the integrity of the investigating process. The two principal means of communication I have with you are our diocesan web site, www.jacksondiocese.org, and the *Mississippi Catholic*. I believe that you should hear the good news and the bad news first from us.

In June, 2002, the Bishops of the United States adopted the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*. This document – approved by the Holy See – binds all bishops to a strict policy for the protection of children and vulnerable adults who are in the care of the Church. The U.S. Bishops have established a national office to monitor the full implementation of the *Charter* in every diocese. The bishops also hired a team of auditors – made up mostly of ex-FBI agents not affiliated with the Catholic Church – to verify each diocese’s observance of the *Charter’s* regulations.

That independent audit recently found that the Diocese of Jackson is in full compliance with the requirements of the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*. The results of the audit can be found on our diocesan web site www.jacksondiocese.org.

In the Diocese of Jackson, many of the requirements of the *Charter* were already in place prior to the 2002 *Charter*. Since 1986, there has been a written policy to address claims of sexual abuse. This policy was updated in 1994 and again in October 2003 to incorporate the requirements of the Dallas *Charter*. This policy requires the reporting of allegations of abuse to the proper civil authorities so that they can conduct their own impartial investigation.

The Diocesan Review Board was established in 1994. Members of the review board include: a judge, two attorneys, a licensed clinical psychologist, a director of a mental health center, and a nurse with experience in dealing with sexual abuse of minors. There are three priest members of the board, one a licensed clinical psychologist; the other two priests have only a passive voice on the board. Members of the review board feel that they can do their job more efficiently if they remain anonymous. Except for three priest members, none of the review board members is employed by the Diocese of Jackson.

The Diocese has established a Safe Environment Program. Training sessions for principals, pastors and DREs were held in November and December 2003. Training sessions on the local level are being carried out during January and February.

The Diocese also has established an Office of Child Protection and implemented a system for criminal background checks of all priests, deacons, religious, employees and volunteers in regular contact with children or vulnerable adults. All policies regarding Church personnel and volunteers have been reviewed and are being improved, where needed, to ensure that everyone is properly screened before working for the Church in any capacity.

I believe that these steps indicate how seriously we take any claim that a child, young person or vulnerable adult was abused by someone acting in the name of the Diocese of Jackson and our commitment to do whatever is possible to prevent this from happening again.

While child abuse exists throughout society, when a member of the clergy is involved, it can be particularly painful because it is a violation of sacred trust. The Church exists for the care of souls. Pastoral care is our first priority and our first response to all who notify us of a claim of sexual misconduct. Jesus Christ ever renews his Church through the grace of conversion, humility and charity. It is in this context that the Church is to deal honestly with the terrible scandal of sexual abuse of minors by some priests.

The offense of sexual abuse is present in so many elements of our society and has unfortunately touched the life of the Church. It is sincerely hoped that the Church's improved response to the incidence of sexual abuse will help others in our society to address this issue for the good of our children. For the Catholic, there is hope that the redemption of Christ can bring true and lasting healing to those harmed by this offense, reconcile the offender and renew the bonds of trust and communion among God's holy people.

In the coming year, my focus will be to re-energize our priests, deacons and all those involved in pastoral ministry; to renew our parishes; to recruit vocations and to reach out to the weakest among us. I ask you to continue to pray for the priests who serve in this diocese so faithfully. You know them as men who minister with dedication and commitment. We need them, now more than ever, to continue the vital work of the Church. I also ask you to pray with me that we will find the wisdom and strength to carry out the mission entrusted to us by the Lord, with love, humility and mercy. With much hard work and prayer, I know that the Church will come through this time of purification to a greater holiness of life among all its members.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Joseph N. Latino
Bishop of Jackson