

The Catholic Register



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A Special Message From Bishop Mark

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In this issue of *The Catholic Register* (pages 7-10), you will find information that many have been asking for a long-time. It has to do with the impact of the clergy sexual abuse scandal on our diocese.

Since the investigative reports about other dioceses in Pennsylvania this past summer, and the alleged abuse committed by a former Cardinal and the cover-up that followed, many of you have shared your thoughts and emotions.

They are described in words like shock, disgust, anger, confusion, disappointment, and betrayal. I understand why you have experienced those thoughts and feelings. I have experienced the same, but I barely have time to process them when there is so much that needs to be done every day. There has not been one day that I did not hear from or about a person who was a victim and struggles to be a survivor of child sexual abuse. I continue to hear from their families who are deeply affected. I hear from the many good priests who are trying to do their best in ministering to God's people.

I have heard from priests who have been accused of these horrible offenses against



SUPPORTING YOUTH: Bishop Mark receives the offertory gifts during a visit to Camp Zacchaeus, the annual diocesan youth summer camp. The Bishop remains dedicated to supporting and nurturing young people through his enthusiastic participation in diocesan youth events.

the innocence and God-given dignity of young people. I have heard from people who have simply walked away from the Church. I have heard from advocates for change. And I have heard from those who will not give another nickel to the Church, to our diocese, until there is change. They want to know what this is all about.

So let's start with looking at the past. The much publicized

case involving the former priest Francis Luddy in 1999 marked the beginning of this long and painful time that we have been going through in our diocese.

In 2004, a second case was in the news involving 21 victims. It demonstrated the fact that the suffering for many victims of sexual abuse and their families began years earlier.

Those two cases prompted the Diocese of Altoona-

Johnstown to initiate a victim assistance program in 2004 to assist all victims of child sexual abuse, regardless of when the abuse occurred, even when legal action was not available because of the Statute of Limitations under Pennsylvania law. Ignoring those limits, the diocese provided a path for all survivors to receive financial assistance, and be provided with counseling and support services so that victims could begin the healing process. From July 1999 to the present, over 290 individuals have received settlements and/or financial assistance through our diocesan program totaling over \$15.7 million. During that same time period an additional \$2.8 million was offered for counseling and support services. As of today, \$515 thousand has been expended by the diocese to provide assistance for those who chose to make use of counseling services.

Elsewhere you will see a chart which shows that a little more than \$4.3 million has been paid for legal expenses. Just under \$900 thousand has been used from the insurance fund and proceeds from the sale of real estate to provide for priests who have been accused of sexual abuse of minors.

It has also been difficult to understand that the diocese paid for most of the damages that

resulted from the misconduct of one religious brother who was not a member of the clergy of our diocese. That is no longer the case since his former superiors have accepted responsibility.

Many have asked where we get the money to pay for all of this. Parish savings and funds designated for specific needs have not been used. This includes, for example, cemetery funds and designated contributions made by individual donors to a specific cause such as Catholic Charities.

As you know, after consulting with the diocesan finance council and college of consultors, I ordered the bishop's residence to be sold and later approved the sale of the Diocesan Administration Center. The proceeds from the sale of these properties were largely applied to the expenses outlined above. The funding for settlements and counseling has otherwise been from savings of the diocese and insurance.

Other dioceses have recently announced the establishment of programs that will involve tens of millions of dollars to provide services and compensation for victims. Our diocesan savings is insufficient

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Bishop's Letter

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to settle remaining requests for compensation at this time.

However, we are in the process of seeking additional funds from past and present insurance plans in order to assist victims. We will continue to do all we can to assist the victim/survivors with counseling expenses as we have been doing since 1999.

I also wish to point out the recently announced reorganization of offices and departments that have been part of diocesan administration. Any future decisions and changes will be made as part of an ongoing approach to planning in support of the mission of the Church while paying attention to available financial resources that can be used to assist victims.

The diocese has and continues to report all allegations of sexual abuse of minors to law enforcement. The diocese has and will continue to cooperate with all investigations according to law.

This has been and continues to be a challenge for our diocese with limited resources and the smallest Catholic population in Pennsylvania. But this lived experience in our diocese, especially with regard to the suffering of victims and their families, is something we need to discern and respond



FAITH DAY GREETING: Bishop Mark welcomes a family at Faith Day 2018. The Bishop is committed to strengthening families and protecting all children and vulnerable individuals throughout the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown.

to with the eyes of faith. At the same time, I am aware that these challenges and burdens have weakened the faith of some.

In all of this, we need to be mindful of those who suffered sexual abuse as minors at the hands of some members of the clergy. The first meeting that I had with a victim/survivor of child sexual abuse was within a few months after I came to the diocese. I have continued to meet with them and their family members, right up to the time of preparing this letter.

I am grateful for those who have come forward to share their stories. We will continue to provide ways for them to be heard. The victims and their families remind me, and all of us,

that they are part of our diocese. They need our attention.

I apologize to all who have suffered from sexual abuse, especially perpetrated by some members of the clergy. I apologize to your families and loved ones. I apologize to all who feel shock, disgust, anger, confusion, disappointment, and betrayal.

When I addressed the media at the time of the publication of the Grand Jury Report concerning our diocese in 2016, I was reminded of the expression, "When you know more, you can do more." All the hard facts that I have shared in this letter are so that you and I can know more.

But there is one more thing. We can never forget that we can

do more. No matter how angry, disgusted, or hurt you feel about all of this, please do not forget our brothers and sisters who have suffered.

In this issue of *The Catholic Register*, we have included what is already being done through the establishment of a full-time Office of Youth Protection; through the reorganization of the Diocesan Review Board and the diligence of an Independent Oversight Board that assists in the assessment of youth protection policies and procedures and makes recommendations for improvement.

The Independent Oversight Board has completed a first year report. It will help us to know more and do more. That report is published in its entirety and is available on the diocesan website.

And so that you may know more, at the beginning of the New Year, a complete audited financial statement of the diocese will be published, and it will become the standard practice every year.

I am doing everything I can to get this right. It cannot be accomplished overnight. As we move forward, I will do my best to share with you our ongoing response to all of these challenges. I could never imagine doing this alone, and I do not try to do that.

These concerns and challenges are regularly brought to the attention of the key councils, boards, and committees that assist in the operations of our diocese. They are comprised mostly of laypersons from throughout the

diocese who bring incredible experience and expertise, and especially the passion and diligence that you would want and expect. I have also reached out to experts independent of the diocese to assist us as we move forward. They have generously agreed to help even though we cannot afford their services.

I understand the negative thoughts and emotions that so many have shared with me. Like most people, it's not always what I wanted to hear, but what I need to hear. I thank God for you every single day.

I am grateful to all of you for your past and current financial support of our parishes, schools, and ministries that provide for the good of the whole diocese and for all whom we are called to serve. I count on you for your prayers, your vigilance, and continued support for the reform and renewal of our diocese.

In this Advent season, please join me in prayer for one another, especially for survivors of sexual abuse and their families. Please know that you are in my prayers every day.

Sincerely in Christ,

+ Mark L. Bartchak

Most Rev. Mark L. Bartchak
Bishop of Altoona-Johnstown

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together in Christ

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