



DIOCESE OF ST. AUGUSTINE

Office of the Bishop

Statement from Bishop Felipe J. Estévez in response to the failure of Church leadership to protect the Lord's flock

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

It is with profound sadness and shame that I write to you, the people of God of the Diocese of St. Augustine, regarding the crisis our church now faces.

Many of you have written to me, emailed and responded through social media. I have read your concerns, and I share your anger, and dismay over the recent grand jury report in Pennsylvania and the allegations that have come to light against Archbishop Theodore McCarrick.

I want you to know that I hear you. You have made it abundantly clear that you don't want more apologies on behalf of the bishops – rather you want to see corrective actions taken against Church leaders who have failed to protect the people they serve. You wonder whether your children are safe in our parishes and schools? You question if allegations are taken seriously? And, like me, you resent what all of this has done to the Church that Jesus Christ established and that you love so much.

I know there is little I can say to restore your trust in the leadership of the Church, but I can assure you of my firmest commitment to provide safe environments for everyone, especially our children and vulnerable adults.

As a first step in that promise of transparency, I want you to know that since 1987 the Diocese of St. Augustine has had in place an independent Review Board that is comprised of lay men and women with expertise in the areas of civil and canon law, criminal investigation, psychology, medicine, and victim advocacy.

When an allegation is made, we have a victim assistance coordinator who accompanies them through the process of reporting their abuse. All necessary reports are made to law enforcement for investigation, and the member of the clergy in question is removed from ministry pending the outcome of an investigation. All sexual child abuse cases are sent to the Review Board to evaluate and provide me with recommendations on appropriate actions. This Board holds me accountable for action.

The stories of those who have suffered abuse are delicate and personal. Their pain is heartbreaking to me. Mostly, when victims come forward after suffering so long, they are not necessarily seeking financial gain. Most are selflessly seeking only to be heard and to do what they can to ensure others won't be harmed because they were silent – and in telling their story, they can begin the healing process. In response, the diocese welcomes them and seeks to accompany them with pastoral care and offers financial assistance for counseling and other services. I pray that all survivors of sexual abuse find healing, comfort, and strength in God's loving presence.

In the next several months, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops will be working to improve the 2002 "Statement of Episcopal Commitment" regarding the safe environment program. In particular, they will address how bishops will be held accountable for their actions and inactions, and a process for prompt, independent, and transparent review will be addressed. I am fully committed to this work and to ensuring that bishops and priests are held not only accountable for their actions but also held accountable for failing to report and hold their brother bishops and priests accountable.

Please know that in the days, weeks and months ahead I will be working closely with lay experts to strengthen the policies and procedures we have in place in our diocese. I look forward to sharing with you the outcome of this work.

You are important to this work. I call upon you to hold me accountable and to pray for me and all the bishops as we pursue resolutions and decisive actions.

I pray for all of you that you will maintain your witness of faith and hope even in these difficult times. Your prayers are needed now more than ever.

Sincerely yours,



Most Reverend Felipe J. Estévez, S.T.D.
Bishop of St. Augustine

August 17, 2018