



Fr. Tom's comments on the Abuse Crisis

Labor Day 2018

My friends, the news of the past few weeks has been filled with stories of abuse that shock, embarrass, and discourage God's faithful because of the grievous sins of some of her shepherds. After all the horrific stories of what has happened in our own state, indeed in our own backyard, now the truth has finally come out about 1,000 plus victims in Pennsylvania from the past 70 years.

Certainly our first response must be one of solidarity with those who have finally been heard. Beyond our prayers for all victims of abuse especially by anyone in authority, we need to do something more, and I don't have all those answers today. One step is that our usual first Wednesday time of prayer for our priests following Wednesday morning Mass will now become a time of prayer for healing and reparation. Similarly, on Saturday, September 15, the Feast of Our Lady of Sorrows, the archbishop and priests of this diocese will gather at the St. Paul Cathedral for a holy hour of prayer for reparation and healing. These are only beginning steps, but never underestimate the power of prayer.

Some people have asked, why is this still happening? Sadly, it appears that there are many dioceses who have still not come forward and provided open access to all their records as we have here in this archdiocese. I certainly can't promise that there aren't more stories to come from other dioceses around this nation.

However, as the Vatican stated but virtually no news reports mentioned, almost none of the cases in Pennsylvania happened since new child safety protocols were put into place in 2002. We don't claim to have a perfect system now, but we have come a long way.

Sadly, some parents ask if their children are safe in our church programs. Yes. This archdiocese has some of the strongest child safety protocols in place in the United States. We have opened all our files for civil authorities to review. We take the background check process very seriously, and we have made certain that we are 100% compliant with it during my time as pastor.

On the diocesan level, we have made certain that decisions regarding any priest or any church employee or volunteer accused of abuse is made first by law enforcement. One of the greatest weapons

we have in stopping abuse at churches, or schools, or any institution or family is to speak out and contact law enforcement first. If someone calls the diocese to report suspected abuse, their first step is to contact the civil authorities.

Then, even if someone is cleared or at least criminal charges will not be pursued, the case goes to an independent board who will make the final recommendation before anyone can be reinstated in church ministry. That board is made up of 12 people including two who have very extensive experience as psychologists in dealing with sex offenders. The board also includes a number of people with legal degrees, one former judge, and a family member of a victim of abuse. The board is made up of 10 lay people, one deacon, and one priest. I know about the good work of that board, because I am the priest on the board and am very impressed by how seriously the board takes its responsibilities.

Finally, the one step that must be addressed now is some level of accountability and independent review of the actions of all bishops. Archbishop Hedba has issued a letter which should be public shortly, in which he acknowledges that all our other steps will have no credibility if there is not also an independent way of investigating any claims of abuse against anyone from a newly ordained priest to the pope. He supports an independent and qualified board like the Ministerial Review Board I spoke of that has the ability to investigate and take action not only regarding claims of abuse but claims of cover up by bishops. Certainly, as Cardinal DiNardo has stated, there are many claims and challenges with how we enforce this across the United States, but he has already petitioned Rome to get that work started.

Again, I don't have all the answers you may be seeking today, my friends. As in all things, I invite us all to be careful about rushing to conclusions or quick fixes. Above all, let us continue to pray for all victims of the scourge of abuse. Thank you.