



DIOCESE OF FAIRBANKS

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OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

8 April 2019

"The unborn child occupies a space in Navajo culture that can best be described as holy or sacred...."
-Navajo Nation

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

As usual, my March travels took me from one end of the country to the other--in addition to visiting villages in western Alaska, I traveled to Washington, D.C, to see two Navy friends ordained bishops and attended a listening session in Arizona with Native Americans. Much discussion during these travels focused on the abuse scandals, which I wanted to share with the faithful in our diocese.

While in Washington, D.C., I was sitting outside a coffee shop in clerics when an older man approached and asked to join me. Of course, I said yes. Not far into the conversation, he asked if I had some inside intel on the crisis in the Church. I assured him he knew as much as I did, from media reports and information coming out of dioceses. I expressed frustration about the abuse of minors and negligent Church leaders. I sensed he needed to hear something hopeful, so I shared that in addition to safeguarding young people through our Safe Environment program, our diocese is tackling the crisis through spiritual warfare. Our priests fast and pray every Friday for survivors, as reparation for sins by clergy and religious. We also set aside special days for all the faithful to pray for the conversion of the Church. My priests, my people, and I are in this battle together.

I mentioned to the man that we have a Catholic radio station in Nome (KNOM) that broadcasts to communities that experienced most of the abuse in our diocese. In January, I traveled to Nome, and was interviewed by KNOM's station manager, with the abuse crisis being a prominent topic. I was joined on the air by Teresa Pitt-Green of Spirit Fire, a ministry that offers the wisdom of the Church's abuse survivors. Both Teresa and Spirit Fire's co-founder, Luis Torres, are clergy abuse survivors who remain active in their Catholic faith.

During the interview, Teresa and I shared ideas about how to reach survivors with a message of hope and healing. We talked about how God stamps a divine blueprint into every person that makes each of us sacred and filled with His beauty, goodness, and truth. In short, we are a very "big deal" to God. Teresa and I--and countless others helping the Church recover from abuse--want to nurture a greater awareness of this innate sacredness in every person, especially among those for whom abuse has deeply wounded their self-image. We talked about rebuilding trust with God and His Church, both for survivors and for all the faithful, who feel betrayed this happened.

My unexpected companion in the nation's capital agreed there is a woundedness caused by Church members but added that abuse is sadly pervasive across all sectors of society and cultures. He sees families of all kinds impacted by the scourge of abuse. He expressed a hope that the purification taking place in the Church right now will sanctify the Body of Christ so we can offer healing again to all of God's children who are isolated and abused.

This man's words were echoed by our Diocesan Safe Environment Review Board when its members met last month. Luis and Teresa guided us via videoconference, helping board members see they are called not just to respond to new abuse allegations, but to accompany survivors on the journey toward healing. The conversation sparked a greater desire for the Review Board to expand its ministry to reach out to the wounded who need Christ's healing love. In the past, the board met annually unless there was an emergency, but now we are planning to meet quarterly to plan our expanded ministry and outreach.

I also serve on a Native American Affairs Subcommittee of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. The group met in Phoenix last month for a listening session, which is part of our efforts to form a 5-year strategic plan to better serve Native American Catholics. We seven bishops listened to a dozen Native Americans from across the United States, with Alaska represented by Billy Charles, a Yup'ik Catholic man from western Alaska and Agnes Sweetsir, an Athabaskan Catholic woman from the interior region. The men and women were honest about the issues they have faced in the past and now. We heard sad stories of abuse, including traumatic separations of parents and children by the Church when boarding schools were common in Alaska. This ethnic abuse still lingers in the souls of Native people as a massive wound, which can manifest as substance abuse and suicide.

Despite these struggles, however, the speakers insisted their indigenous beliefs are still alive in their hearts and souls. This living heritage includes a most beautiful belief in the sacredness of every person from conception to natural death, which aligns perfectly with our Catholic faith. One Navajo man in his 30s passionately insisted his beautiful traditional Native culture is a much-needed antidote to the abuse, hatred, and division we see in the world.

I saw the beauty of Native culture firsthand last month when I visited parishes in Tununak, Nelson Island, Toksook Bay, and Nightmute. In Tununak, I witnessed a Dance Festival where a young man and woman were invited to perform their first dance to celebrate the first catch of moose and fish. It was deeply moving to watch these Native Alaskans thank God through these dances for the abundance of creation and share His bounty with others. I also was privileged to confirm two dozen young people in these villages. These were positive celebrations of Native heritage, our Catholic faith, and the sacredness of all life.

Our society and Church continue to carry significant wounds from the abuse of children and vulnerable adults. April is dedicated to Child Abuse Awareness and I invite the faithful to join me at a **Healing Mass at Sacred Heart Cathedral on April 25 at 12:10pm**. May we all take time to be a healing presence to our brothers and sisters and do our part to uphold the sacred dignity given to every person by God.

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chad W. Zielinski". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

†Most Reverend Chad W. Zielinski
Catholic Bishop of Northern Alaska
Diocese of Fairbanks

CWZ/mm