



## DIocese OF FAIRBANKS

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OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

3 November 2018

Dear Brothers & Sisters in Christ,

As discussion increases across the United States about the abuse crisis in the Church, there continues to be frustration over failed leadership, cover-ups, and lack of oversight. The faithful in our diocese are asking, “Where are we in this process? What is happening?” To answer these questions, it may be helpful to review our history with regards to sexual abuse, as well as our ongoing actions to prevent further abuse against children and vulnerable adults.

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### **Recent History**

In March 2010, the Diocese of Fairbanks emerged from bankruptcy brought on by allegations of sexual abuse. The bankruptcy resulted in a reorganization of our diocese. Part of that included posting on our website the names of all individuals against whom a complaint of corporal punishment or sexual abuse had been filed by one or more individuals. This included priests, religious, lay employees, and volunteers—in short, anyone associated with the Church. The list includes admitted, proven, or credibly-accused perpetrators of corporal punishment or sexual abuse. You may view this list at [bit.ly/DOFList](http://bit.ly/DOFList).

Today, the diocese has a wholly responsive and transparent process for handling any abuse claims. In 2014, for example, a diocesan employee discovered explicit photos of minors on a priest’s computer. The diocese immediately contacted law enforcement and assisted fully in the investigation. The priest was convicted in Federal Court, and is now incarcerated and in the process of being laicized.

The Diocese of Fairbanks unequivocally condemns abuse of any kind, for abuse violates the dignity of the human person. We take claims of abuse seriously, turn over evidence to law enforcement immediately, and cooperate fully with investigations of abuse. We also offer to assist survivors in any way possible to help them move toward justice and healing.

### **Ongoing Actions**

#### ***Care for Abuse Survivors***

- The diocese continues to offer compassion, guidance, and counseling to anyone who reports abuse. Our Victim Assistance Coordinator welcomes phone calls or visits from survivors. Please call 907-374-9516 to report abuse.
- Most of our past abuse cases took place in rural Alaska. To assist with healing in these communities, faith leaders in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region recently began an Intercultural Dialogue group. Our rural Catholics insist healing must be led by the native people themselves and the diocese is committed to supporting local initiatives that facilitate healing. Three parishes have already participated in *Pathway to Hope*, a community-based program that uses an indigenous framework for healing from sexual abuse.

### ***Safeguards Against Abuse***

- *Safe Environment Training*—Since January 1991, the diocese has conducted mandatory Safe Environment Training for all Church personnel and volunteers who work near minors and vulnerable adults. This training includes actions and policies used to prevent sexual abuse, identifying signs of sexual abuse, and the actions that should be taken if abuse is suspected. This training continues to be a requirement and individuals must renew their training every five years. The diocese maintains documentation of completed training and background checks for its annual audit, which is conducted by an independent agency. Our most recent audit was completed August 30, 2018, and was found to be compliant. It is **most critical** that our parishes ensure all volunteers and employees complete this mandatory training.
- *Safe Environment Review Board*—This board consists of men and women with expertise in counseling, criminal investigation, law enforcement, and legal counsel, as well as priests and representatives from our native Alaskan community. The board meets semi-annually to review and update our policies as needed. It will meet at a moment's notice for any allegation of sexual abuse. These cases are immediately reported to local law enforcement authorities.

### ***Formation and Support of Clergy/Religious***

- Three years ago, I implemented quarterly Spiritual Formation Days for clergy and religious. We also meet annually with the other two Alaskan dioceses for a Convocation in Anchorage. Clerical and lay experts lead presentations and discussions about safe environment, professional boundaries, and living a healthy celibate life. In addition, priests and religious gather about every four weeks in their respective regions for professional and spiritual development.
- The diocese conducts two retreats annually for deacons—one for road system deacons around Fairbanks and one for men serving in the Yukon-Kuskokwim region. Regional coordinators also conduct ongoing spiritual formation of deacons throughout the year.
- In September, I implemented a Priest and Religious Review Board. The board is currently comprised of three priests, a male religious person, a female religious person, a permanent deacon, a Native Alaskan woman, and two married couples. Any new incoming priest or religious will be asked to meet with the board, whose members will make a recommendation either for or against acceptance of the new priest to the bishop.
- The greatest support to a priest or religious comes from a family interacting with that person outside the parish. The witness of holy and healthy marriages encourages and supports holy and healthy clergy and religious. We are blessed to have many groups that reach out to support our clergy, religious, and seminarians.

### ***Seminarian Review and Formation***

- The diocese recently formed a Seminarian Review Board comprised of the Vocations Director and several married couples. Once a man has made a formal application to begin seminary, he will be interviewed by the board, which will then make a recommendation to the bishop.
- Once accepted, our seminarians are constantly evaluated throughout formation. For three decades, seminarians have undergone extensive evaluations by an independent psychologist as part of their formation. They must meet with a spiritual director and formation directors monthly. Lay and clerical professors have direct input on their annual evaluations. Additionally, pastoral staff with whom the seminarians work in their various field assignments also offer feedback to the diocese. Overall, seminarians are evaluated by numerous individuals on the four pillars of priestly formation: human, pastoral, spiritual, and intellectual. Lengthy reports are sent to the bishop and Vocation Director.

- Seminarians are required to complete an intensive, 8-week spiritual formation course at the Institute for Priestly Formation in Omaha, Nebraska. They also must participate in a Pastoral Year formation in a parish in our diocese. This provides hands-on experience for the seminarian and further opportunity to discern a call to the priesthood. It also provides direct interaction with the faithful, who are encouraged to pray for them and support them in their journey. The faithful's feedback to their pastor or the diocesan Vocation Director about a seminarian is always welcome.

***Spiritual Focus on Healing***

- I have dedicated October 7, 2018 through October 7, 2019 to the Mother of God. I ask that we, as the people of God, turn to the Blessed Mother in more focused prayer, asking her to help us draw closer to her Son as our Church grows in holiness.
- I invite parishioners to join me, clergy, and the religious of our diocese in fasting and doing a Holy Hour before the Blessed Sacrament each Friday during the next year. This fasting, prayer, and penance is in reparation for sins of sexual abuse committed by bishops, priests, and religious. In fact, we will be promoting a series of devotions over the next year centered on this intention.

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During my travels as a bishop, I have publicly apologized for the grave abuses of Church personnel that have left horrible wounds in people's souls. I also have apologized for ethnic abuse directed at our Native Alaskan brothers and sisters from priests and religious in the past. I am grateful we now understand the importance of sharing the Gospel in culturally-affirmative ways.

As I talk with the priests and religious who serve in our 46 parishes in northern Alaska, I am amazed at the ongoing accompaniment they so often offer to the survivors of abuse. I have witnessed our priests and religious compassionately walk with these souls, and give them hope and healing that they are still a most beautiful child of God.

We can never do enough to make reparation for the sins of abuse caused to minors and vulnerable adults. Together as a Church, may we continue to pray, fast, and do penance for our Church to grow in holiness. Above all, may we turn to the Mother of God to help us be a more faithful disciple of her Son, whose grace can bring encouragement and healing to those who carry these wounds.

Sincerely in Christ,



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



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