

May 23, 2023

Statement of Bishop Ronald A. Hicks on the Illinois Attorney General's Report on Catholic Clergy Sexual Abuse of Minors

The Illinois attorney general's office today issued a final report on clergy sexual abuse of minors in the six Catholic dioceses in the state. This report is the result of our four years' cooperation with the Attorney General's office, beginning in 2019. The pages of the final report tell a story of pain, grief, shame, betrayal, and anger experienced by innocent individuals because of unspeakable acts by clergy in the Diocese of Joliet. Although the majority of abuse occurred decades ago, many victims/survivors remain haunted to this day.

As the sixth bishop of the Diocese of Joliet, I express profound remorse over any failure of the diocese to respond to an allegation of abuse with prompt and compassionate attention. I pledge to ensure the diocese maintains strict adherence to the safeguards mandated by the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* adopted by the U.S. bishops in 2002. And I pray for the continued healing of victims/survivors so they may overcome the burden of their pain and move forward with courage.

Some may be thinking, "I thought this was over." No sin of such great magnitude as sexual abuse of minors should ever be forgotten. Remembering the harm done forces us to remain vigilant in our efforts to ensure it never happens again. As a Diocese, we will continue to dedicate significant resources to protecting children, preventing abuse, and promoting healing.

I again offer my prayers of remorse, vigilance, and healing for victims/survivors of sexual abuse in the Diocese of Joliet and the entire Catholic Church. I invite other child-serving organizations and civil authorities to join us in this work and consider adopting the procedures we have developed over the past 30 years so that all children are protected. Ultimately, the Church and society need to work together to do everything possible to keep our children safe.

Diocese of Joliet Process Followed When an Allegation of Abuse Is Received

The diocese created its first policy on clergy sexual abuse of minors in 1990, 12 years before the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* (the *Charter*) was established by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. In 1993, the diocese established its first independent review committee to investigate all allegations of clergy sexual abuse of minors. That same year, the diocese also established its first pastoral response team to provide assistance to victims/survivors.

The Charter has been revised several times, most recently in 2018. The Charter was established to address allegations of the sexual abuse of minors by clergy and also includes guidelines for reconciliation, healing, accountability, and steps to prevent abuse. Since the approval of the *Charter* in 2002, the Diocese of Joliet has followed its mandated blueprint to create a safe environment for children and vulnerable adults in our churches, schools, and activities.

The diocese takes seriously every allegation brought forth, be it reported by an individual who suffered abuse or a third party. The first step is always the same: We encourage and help all who are bringing forward real-time allegations of abuse and/or neglect of minors to report them to the state child welfare agency – the Department of Children and Family Services' (DCFS)

hotline (1-800-25-ABUSE) here in Illinois – and the local civil authorities. The diocese also reports each real-time allegation in accordance with the Illinois Abused and Neglected Child Reporting Act and to local civil authorities and offers the help of our victim assistance coordinator to the victim-survivor. The victim assistance coordinator is available to talk with and listen to the victim-survivor and provide outreach and support services to the victim-survivor and his or her family. The victim assistance coordinator is also able to assist a victim-survivor in making a report to the authorities. The victim assistance coordinator may be reached at 815-263-6467.

Per diocesan policy, upon receipt of an allegation of the sexual abuse of a minor by a cleric, the bishop is informed. If the cleric is alive and in ministry, the cleric is publicly removed from ministry and advised of his right to counsel.

The diocese investigates every allegation received. The same investigative process is followed whether the accused is alive, deceased or already listed on the diocesan list of clergy members with substantiated allegation(s) of sexual abuse of a minor or vulnerable adult. If public authorities conduct a criminal investigation against the cleric, the diocese defers its own investigation until that public inquiry is concluded and cooperates fully with civil authorities.

Following the diocesan investigation, allegations against clergy not already on the diocesan public list go before the diocesan review board for a determination of whether the allegation is substantiated. The review board advises the bishop in his assessment of the allegations and the cleric's suitability for ministry. Clergy members determined to have substantiated allegations are permanently removed from ministry and their names and assignments are published on the diocesan list. When an allegation is found to be unsubstantiated, the cleric is returned to ministry.

When the diocese receives an allegation of the sexual abuse of a minor by an extern priest, i.e., a priest from another diocese, a religious order priest or a professed religious man and woman, the allegation is reported to civil authorities and the services of the victim assistance ministry are offered to the accuser and his or her family. The diocese of Joliet notifies the bishop of the other diocese or religious superior of the order of the allegation. If the priest or member of a religious order is in active ministry in the Diocese of Joliet, their ability to minister in this diocese is immediately revoked (removal of faculties) while the allegation is investigated. The other diocese or religious order oversees the investigation into the allegation using its own review board process and advises the Diocese of Joliet of the outcome.

We invite everyone to view our public list, as well as policies, standards of behavior and other resources, at www.diojoliet.org. **No cleric with a substantiated allegation against him is in active ministry in our Diocese.**

Anyone who knows or suspects that a child has been abused or neglected is encouraged to make a report to civil authorities. Please contact the Illinois DCFS hotline at 1-800-25-ABUSE and the local police department.

Requirements Mandated of All Diocese of Joliet Clergy, Employees, and Volunteers Who Work with Minors

All Diocese of Joliet clergy and employees must submit to the following requirements:

- A criminal background check.

- Create an account with Virtus Online, a web-based platform that provides resources and tracking of an individual's diocesan safe environment compliance requirements.
- Participate in a Virtus Protecting God's Children for Adults training, a national training program that combats child sexual abuse.
- Read the diocese's policy regarding sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable adults and acknowledge receipt with a signature and date.
- Read the diocese's standards of behavior for those working with minors and vulnerable adults and acknowledge receipt with a signature and date.
- Read monthly continuing education materials.

In addition, all mandated reporters must take mandated reporter training once every three years, per the Illinois' Abused and Neglected Child Reporting Act (ANCRA).

Volunteers who work with minors must submit to the same requirements except for monthly continuing education materials. They also must complete a volunteer application if they are seeking a repetitive role, such as coach, catechist, youth ministry leader, etc.

Please continue to pray for all victims/survivors of sexual abuse as we accompany them in their journey of healing. Be assured the Diocese of Joliet will continue to remain vigilant in its obligation to safeguard all children and in our Church.