

Where sin increases, grace abounds.

By: Bishop Steven Biegler

In this issue of the Wyoming Catholic Register, we are making public a list of all Catholic clergy with substantiated allegations of sexual abuse of minors or vulnerable persons for whom we have files and who were in active ministry from 1950 to the present in the Diocese of Cheyenne. Our clergy are expected to be shepherds who guard and protect the flock, especially the least among us. They are called to imitate the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep. Therefore, sexual abuse by clergy is an appalling sin and a reprehensible crime. It contradicts everything we stand for. Each name on this list represents a betrayal of trust, a violation of the innocent and a human tragedy.

Recently, I met with a victim of clerical sexual abuse who is making progress on a journey of healing. He told me, “there will always be bad guys,” but what is important is “that institutions can be trusted to do the right thing” – that is, the Church and law enforcement – so that those who have been harmed can find hope in honest institutions and the credibility of good leaders. My sense was that he was wounded not only by the sexual abuse, but even more so by how he was treated by institutions that failed to respond to his case with fairness and justice. As a consequence, he felt shunned, isolated, and without recourse.

On behalf of the church, I apologize to each victim, not only for the misconduct of those who committed sexual abuse, but also for the failure of any Church leader who did not take appropriate action after having received a report of an allegation. Finally, I pledge to do all that we can to assist with your healing and to learn from errors in our past.

The purpose of a public listing

Several dioceses and religious orders have published lists of clergy with substantiated allegations of sexual abuse. Nevertheless, some question the purpose for doing this. While this is not a practice of other public institutions like schools and other faith communities, there are good reasons for doing it. Here is my rationale. First, the Catholic Church made a commitment to transparency in the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, which stated: “Dioceses are to be open and transparent in communicating with the public about sexual abuse of minors by clergy” (cf. Article 7).

In the past, this information was kept confidential, and as a consequence, other children were harmed. Transparency helps prevent future abuse because it makes it almost impossible for those of us in church leadership to backslide on our promise of zero tolerance. It is, we hope, a means of restoring trust with the laity. Credibility depends upon open and honest communication.

In addition, there have been times when church leaders did not believe victims of sexual abuse even when their allegations were true. Sometimes their allegations were not investigated. Other times substantiating evidence was ignored. I pray that publication of this list today is a clear signal that things have changed. Because the Church has been more transparent in recent years, victims have felt that their voices are being heard, and it encourages others who have been abused to come

forward. Transparency creates an atmosphere in which victims can breathe a sigh of relief and know that they can speak about this horrible experience. I know this personally because victims of family sexual abuse have written to me after they learned about the steps that we have taken to address sexual abuse in the Diocese.

Furthermore, in the Church and society Catholic clergy have a unique role. They are mediators between God and people. By the grace of ordination, the priest stands in the place of Christ. Catholics refer to him as an *alter Christus* (another Christ). Little children often view the priest as Jesus. In counseling and the Sacrament of Reconciliation, people open themselves to clergy with profound vulnerability. Catholic clergy are more than public servants, and they should adhere to a higher standard. Their unique role demands a correspondingly elevated response when they commit a scandalous crime.

With zero tolerance and publication of the names of clergy with substantiated allegations, some ask, “Where is mercy?” God’s mercy knows no bounds, and abusers who acknowledge their sins are readily forgiven. But there is a difference between divine forgiveness and ecclesiastical reassignment. Mercy must be balanced with responsibility, consequences for one’s actions and the protection of others.

Finally, we need to be compassionate to victims. Too often some have expressed concern for merciful treatment of clergy abusers without mention of the victims. That has to change. Our society needs a conversion regarding how we think about those affected by sexual abuse. We need a revolution in our thinking so that the victims are at the center of our hearts.

The term ‘substantiated’ allegation

For this publication, we have used the term ‘substantiated’ allegation. There are a number of factors which could substantiate an allegation: (1) if the accused has admitted to the conduct in whole or in part; (2) if the victim speaks with consistency while offering information about the alleged offender and other relevant facts; (3) if there is corroborating evidence; (4) if others offer knowledgeable testimony; (5) if multiple, independent allegations manifest similar patterns; (6) if there was prior grooming with sexual content; and other factors. When such elements are present, they help us determine that the allegation is likely true or substantiated. When these elements are absent, the allegation is unconfirmed and lacks substantiation.

There is no official church definition of the term ‘substantiated’ in regard to allegations of sexual abuse. For our purposes, we are using the following definition: *A substantiated allegation* is one which has been determined to have reasonable probability or even certainty based on a convincing level of proof.

Process of the File Review

I had hoped to be able to share these results earlier. However, the review of each file is a tedious process that requires a diligent and careful study of the facts. To assist the diocese with this effort, we engaged the services of Nussbaum Speir PLLC, a law firm with expertise and experience in conducting similar file reviews for Catholic dioceses. At our request, Nussbaum Speir has provided us with an impartial and comprehensive assessment of 303 files going back to 1950 of Catholic

clergy of the Diocese of Cheyenne, including 5 bishops, 253 priests and 45 deacons. Subsequent to that review, the Diocese conducted a further review of particular files in order to clarify some cases by additional investigation.

The date of 1950 was selected with a focus on those victims who may still be living, and to reflect the availability of historic files that might contain allegations of abuse. This date also coincides with the earlier study of sexual abuse of minors conducted by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

The Church has a responsibility to be transparent about sexual misconduct with minors by those in Church leadership, and I have an obligation to protect those entrusted to my pastoral care. At the same time, I have a responsibility to protect the good names of clergy, who have served with selfless dedication, from having their reputations harmed by sincere but unsubstantiated accusations. It is difficult to discern the truth of an event that allegedly happened decades ago, especially if the accused is deceased or the memories of others, who could have provided helpful information, have faded.

The list that we are providing today is as accurate as we can make it based on the information we now possess. However, in some cases we were not able to ascertain whether or not an allegation was substantiated. If new information comes to light, the list will be updated. In accord with the *Charter*, we observe zero tolerance. If a priest has one substantiated allegation of sexual abuse of a minor or vulnerable adult, then he is not allowed to do any public ministry.

A diocesan bishop does not have the same authority over all priests assigned within the Diocese. They can be: (a) diocesan priests of the local diocese, (b) diocesan priests of another diocese, or (c) priests of a religious order. For those priests in the latter two categories, the bishop assigns them to ministry within the Diocese and has authority over their ministry; however, their own bishop or religious superior has jurisdiction over them in all other matters of religious life and discipline. Our diocesan files are incomplete for such priests because only a portion of their priestly ministry happened within this Diocese. If they committed sexual abuse elsewhere, then their religious orders or dioceses will decide whether to name them in their own reports. For those reasons, we did not publish names of such priests on this list, unless we received a substantiated allegation that such a priest sexually abused a minor while he served within the Diocese of Cheyenne.

In the next few months, there will be new procedures implemented for allegations against bishops. This was addressed in the May 9, 2019 publication of Pope Francis's *Motu Proprio*, *Vos estis lux mundi* ("You are the light of the world"). Information about the *Motu Proprio* is included elsewhere in this issue of the diocesan paper. The U.S. bishops will be discussing that document and other sexual abuse policies during their meeting in Baltimore the week of June 10.

Shining the Light on a Hidden Plague

I am grateful to members of the media who have brought accusations to light or advocated for greater transparency and justice by the Church and society to address this evil. This is a human problem which needs attention in every arena of public and private life. In addition, I am grateful

to the members of our Diocesan Review Board who have dedicated many hours and offered invaluable counsel in evaluating sexual abuse allegations.

In a special way, I want to thank the victims who have come forward with allegations. Your courageous action helps to prevent someone else from being victimized, and I trust that by bringing this into the light it will benefit you on the journey of healing. I regularly pray for the healing of victims/survivors of sexual abuse, and I am willing to meet with them and accompany them on their journey of healing. Victims may also contact the diocesan Victim's Assistance Coordinator, Mary Adams, who will help them to obtain support for their needs. In addition, we have established the Shalom Fund to provide financial assistance for those who need counseling. Furthermore, I am in the process of consulting professionals with experience in counseling of sexual abuse clients, with the intention of developing a healing ministry for all who have experienced sexual abuse in society.

In God's providence, this painful time has opened a new conversation in the Church and society so that everyone is more aware of the horrible reality of sexual abuse. Now we have a heightened knowledge of the scourge of sexual abuse in families, schools, scouting, athletics, churches, and virtually every corner of society. People are more vigilant about protecting minors or vulnerable persons. And those who were abused are feeling the freedom to speak out. The hidden plague of abuse is being exposed to the light. Thus, God is using this agonizing time as a new dawn.

During the next six months, I ask you to join me in praying for the healing of victims, for the repentance and forgiveness of abusers, and for the Catholic Church to become a place of healing for anyone who has been abused. Also, please pray for me and all bishops, that we may be granted wisdom, counsel, courage and hope. Please make a commitment to pray at least 15 minutes a day. Your family could pray a rosary together, meditate on a Scripture passage or spend the time in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament.

Prayer is the foundation for a renewal in our Church. Nothing is more important because God alone is the source of new life. Prayer moves us from desolation to hope. Instead of being discouraged by sin, we are reminded that God is greater than evil. As St. Paul said, "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rom. 5:20).