

From the Most Reverend Larry Silva, Bishop of Honolulu  
To the Clergy, Religious and Laity of the Diocese of Honolulu  
Response to recent news about the scandal of sexual abuse in the Church  
August 23, 2018

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Once again there is tremendous anger and outrage at the recent news of a high ranking former Cardinal who resigned from the College of Cardinals because of credible accusations against him of sexually abusing minors and of using his power to coerce seminarians and priests to satisfy his own sexual desires. Then there is the news of past clerical sexual misconduct in six dioceses in Pennsylvania, which, when put together, presents a picture that produces in all of us anger, sorrow, and even a shaking of our faith. It was not only the abuse that is a scandal, but the way some bishops dealt with the abuse that is so demoralizing and disgusting. The sinfulness of many in the Catholic Church has been brought into full and painful light. We pray that such light will lead us to eliminate this scourge from the Church once and for all. And while it is easy to lament what happened in another part of the country, we must painfully admit that such abuse did happen here in Hawaii. Many of the victims of this abuse are living among us, and we pray for them first of all, because they have suffered so much. And while the wounds inflicted upon their psyches are bad enough, the wounds inflicted on their faith in a loving God are also tragic. As a bishop of the Catholic Church, I offer them my apologies and my prayers for healing. Some say that complete healing is not possible, since the wounds are so deep. But even if the scars remain, all things are possible for God, so we plead with the only One who can truly affect healing to do so.

Some have wondered why I did not issue a strong statement against sexual abuse in the Church as soon as this news broke. I could have issued the kind of statement that most bishops issued because it is expected of us. It seems there is an expectation that every bishop make a strong statement against this evil in the Church whenever it is a hot topic in the media. But I believe statements are easy to make. What people want is real change and to see that the problem is seriously addressed. I would therefore like to tell you what we are doing to make sure this never happens again. And then I would like to open up some issues that must come to light if we are to truly and effectively address this scourge.

In 2002 the bishops of the United States issued the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*. But there was much that was being done even before that time. We have a very robust Safe Environment Program, which trains clergy, teachers, youth ministers, and those with any trusted position with youth to learn the signs of sexual abuse, to define appropriate boundaries, and to be proactive in the protection of youth. Even with many budget constraints, we hired Kristin Leandro full time to oversee the Office of Safe Environment [kleandro@rcchawaii.org or (808) 203-6719]. Training happens for all clergy, teachers, youth ministers, catechists -- and for children and youth at age-appropriate levels. Our Safe Environment Program is audited by an independent agency every year, and since the audits began in 2004, the Diocese of Honolulu has been found in complete compliance. We also have a Diocesan Review Board, primarily made up of lay people and including mental health and law enforcement professionals, which reviews policies and any particular accusations of sexual abuse that may occur in the diocese. They make recommendations for real solutions to concrete situations. We have invited anyone who has been abused by a priest, deacon, or Church worker

to report such abuse to a Victim Assistance Coordinator, who is a trained counselor with Catholic Charities Hawaii [Elizabeth Lyons: [elizabeth.lyons@catholiccharitieshawaii.com](mailto:elizabeth.lyons@catholiccharitieshawaii.com) or (808) 527-4604]. We have enforced the “zero tolerance” policy of the *Charter* by removing permanently from ministry any cleric who has a credible accusation of abuse of a minor made against him, no matter how long ago the offense may have occurred. We are doing all we humanly can do to assure that this evil will never again be perpetrated in our Church.

One of the insidious realities in this whole scandal is that when those who were abused come forward, they may be told by a parent or another cleric to keep it to themselves and never to talk about the abuse. This, of course, allows the wound to fester not only in the person abused but in the community by enabling an abuser to continue along his destructive path. We pray that this kind of secrecy will not be tolerated, so that evil can be brought to light and dealt with head on.

However, if we really want to fix this problem, another kind of silencing must also end. Very often I as a bishop have been told in sometimes clear and sometimes subtle ways that there are certain things I must not say out loud because people will interpret them as defensive and not sensitive to the victims of abuse. I know that the popular assessment of a “Yes, but...” statement is that the “but” discounts the “yes.” But (!) if we are to talk about how to come up with real solutions, these things also need to be spoken out loud. Let me emphasize, however, that none of these things is meant to minimize the seriousness of the crime of sexual abuse of a minor nor to let the bishop or anyone else off the hook for taking proper responsibility. So at the risk of being judged as uncaring, let me begin.

YES, I know that brevity is considered a virtue and that these days we must try to put all of our thoughts in a sound bite or a Tweet.

BUT, some things need explanation and cannot be adequately treated in sound bites.

SO, I invite your patience with these lengthy musings.

YES, bishops have committed the grievous sin of covering over abuse. This is clear from the current mess we find ourselves in.

BUT it is often presumed that the bishop actually knew of the abusive situation, when in fact he may not have known at all. Many plaintiffs who have filed suit against the Church have said, “I never told anyone about this until now.” Moreover, I have been told by others who knew of abusive situations, “You must have known about this,” when in fact I did not. Sometimes there is a concerted effort by the abuser to keep the matter away from the attention of the bishop.

SO, bishops should be held accountable for responding to situations they know about, but it should not be presumed that they knew about them.

YES, bishops must do the right thing and deal with these situations justly. Ultimately they are the ones who must discipline the clergy under their care.

BUT, bishops have a special paternal kind of relationship with their priests, which means that, like most parents, they do not want to believe the worst about their children. We try to be objective, but that relationship is a reality.

SO, perhaps the bishop should not be the first to receive a report of abuse, and mechanisms should be established in every diocese for such reports to be made to a more neutral person or board who can report the allegations to the bishop, but who will then work with the bishop to see

that the proper safeguards are in place so that the accused cleric is placed on administrative leave while an investigation goes forward.

YES, anyone who has the courage to come forward to report being abused should be taken seriously and should not be discounted. The person should know that such a report is received with respect and that a full investigation will be carried out. There are many who say such a report should not be doubted, because it will discourage the reporter from pursuing the matter.

BUT, a bishop who presumes the guilt of a cleric simply because someone has accused him is committing another travesty to justice. In fact many priests have the fear that if one person who has an issue with the priest for any reason tells the bishop the priest abused him, the priest's vocation is effectively ruined. Bishops have a responsibility of justice toward their good priests as well as toward those who have actually been abused.

SO, everyone must understand that both sides of the story need to be thoroughly investigated and that bishops are not being disrespectful of the reporter by having the kind of openness to both sides that justice demands.

YES, those who have been abused should feel they can come forward to freely report any kind of abuse they have experienced or witnessed. This is the only way these heinous deeds that are always done in secret can be brought out into the light. Reporting such a crime, which is always a serious matter, should not become an undue burden to the person reporting.

BUT, the person who makes the report must understand that doing so will complicate his or her life. More than once I have had people say to me, "I am going to tell you something, but I do want you to do anything about it," or "but I will not tell you the name of the person I am referring to." I have to tell them that if they do not want me to do anything about it, then they should not tell me, because if they tell me, I must do something about it. Reporting, however, will mean the person will have to be involved in the investigation. While all efforts will be made to protect the identity of a whistle blower, sometimes the perpetrator (who does have to be informed of the accusation) will know or be able to find out who revealed the information.

SO, while we encourage honest and open reporting, we hope the reporter will understand that he or she is taking a risk and that life will become complicated. They need to be assured that accepting this kind of burden will ultimately lead to greater safety for children or others so that abuse will not occur again.

YES, we should encourage anyone who has been abused to come forward to report the abuse. It should not be left to fester for years, thus also perhaps endangering others the abuser may prey upon. Bishops are told, therefore, that they should never oppose the lifting of the statute of limitation for reporting the sexual abuse of a minor and are often criticized when they do.

BUT, most of the reporting is not through the healing channels offered by the Church through the Victim Assistance Coordinator, but by means of a civil suit. When this happens, it is more difficult, if not impossible, for the Church to reach out to the victim effectively in compassion, since the legal process prevents the defendant speaking directly to the plaintiff, lest the case be undermined. Secondly, these civil suits usually involve significant amounts of money, and while this may help the victim in the healing process, do not bishops also have a responsibility to be good stewards of the funds that are entrusted to them by parishioners for the sake of the ministries and services of the Church? I would think it would be most irresponsible for a bishop to say "You are entitled to whatever you think is fair," when the money at his disposal is not his

but the money given by parishioners to support our catechesis, our social outreach, and our life of prayer together. The bishop who tries to be fair to the victims and a good steward of the resources of the diocese is often accused of not caring about the victim by keeping a tight string on the purse of the diocese.

It also needs to be said that there is often a presumption that these settlements punish the perpetrators of these crimes. While there may be some nominal payment by a perpetrator, the bulk of the money comes from the diocese, so the ones who are punished are not the perpetrators (or even bishops who cover up) but the people of the diocese. Moreover, while civil law protects the perpetrator from criminal prosecution, the Church has no statute of limitations once a cleric has been found guilty of sexual abuse of a minor, and that cleric is removed from ministry for the rest of his life.

SO, let us find a way to help victims of sexual abuse while respecting the Church's mission of evangelizing, teaching, and serving the poor. There are few institutions that educate more children and that serve more poor people than the Catholic Church, but we need resources to continue these vital ministries.

YES, sexual abuse has happened in the Catholic Church, and we must not deny it. We must take full responsibility for it and do all we can to see that it does not happen again.

BUT, the media often fail to mention that most (though unfortunately not all) of the cases are historical cases, not under the watch of the current bishop. Yet the picture is often painted that these kinds of abuses are rampant and are going on right now. This is a real injustice to the good clergy who serve our people, conduct youth programs, run schools and religious education programs, and who would never think of hurting a young person.

SO, let us be very discriminating about what we read or hear in the media, since at times the truth is twisted and the narrative packaged to accomplish their own agenda.

YES, we must hold people in authority accountable when we commit crimes or cooperate with criminal behavior by covering it up.

BUT, we must be careful of a culture that is so suspicious of people in authority that authority itself is undermined. I recently spoke to a teacher who is frustrated because her pupils have shockingly little respect for her or anyone else in authority. While real abuses need to be addressed, the culture of suspicion has actually eroded the healthy environment in which our youth are growing up, often causing them to be cynical about any authority.

SO, while we cannot stop holding those of us in authority accountable, we must also help each other develop a legitimate respect for authority, because it is for the good of children and all of society.

YES, the laity need to be intimately involved in helping find solutions to this cancer in our Church, and we must include them because of their expertise in various fields and their distance from a clerical culture.

BUT, we must not be naïve and think that all laity will be helpful. I have known many lay people who, even when presented evidence of abuse by a clergyman, allowed their loyalty to him to trump the protection of children.

SO, we must involve the laity in helping to solve this problem, but we must discern very carefully who can truly be helpful, who have blind loyalties, and who have some other agenda to fulfill rather than the protection of children and youth.

YES, much of the clergy sex abuse scandal has been cast in the light of pedophilia – a sexual attraction to young children.

BUT, a very small percentage of the abusive clergy have preyed on little children, while the majority have preyed on post-pubescent boys. Yet there is a denial that this problem has anything to do with homosexuality. This is something we are not supposed to talk about, but it needs to be discussed. I do believe that there are many fine priests with a same-sex attraction who live celibately and who would never think of hurting a young person. On the other hand, there are priests – and here we have to say of both same-sex and opposite-sex attraction – who are living double lives and who participate in groups that support these infidelities. This will never create an atmosphere in which children – or adults -- are safe from predation.

SO, we must with new vigor and insights find ways to support seminarians and priests to embrace celibacy for the holiness, true love, and dedication it is meant to convey, rather than seeing it as a burden to grudgingly bear.

YES, the media have done the Church a favor by exposing these horrible acts and their cover ups. Perhaps we would not have done the things we have done to correct these sins if the media had not exposed them and called us to accountability.

BUT, the media also have a way of creating their own narrative. Their dedication to the truth is sometimes lost with political agenda, seldom reporting on the significant progress the Catholic Church has made in the protection of children and youth. (Dare I say what no bishop is supposed to say: that no other institution has done more than the Catholic Church in the USA to prevent child abuse?)

SO, while we need to ask tough questions of the hierarchy, we also need to hold the feet of the media to the fire of truth.

YES, this whole ugly scandal calls into question the moral authority of the Church and its chief teachers, the bishops, some of whom have themselves been abusers and others enablers, since they have obviously failed in living up to their teachings.

BUT, make no mistake that much of the constant focus on the Catholic Church is due the animus that many have toward the Church for the moral stands we take on the sanctity of every human life, on the beauty of chastity, the sanctity of marriage between one man and one woman, and the ordering of our sexual lives according to God's plan. The failures and sins are there, but often they are shouted out and paraded in the public square less in order to heal and call to repentance and more to undermine the authority of the teachings themselves and to intimidate and undermine the teachers.

SO, let us also be honest about the significant fuel that enemies of the Catholic Church are only too happy to pour onto this hellish mess.

And finally,

YES, this is a scandal that sickens and saddens us all, and we must find mechanisms to assure a culture that protects children.

BUT, we must realize that some of this is beyond our human abilities to solve, so we rely on the help of the Lord, who can calm any storm and raise up the putrid dead to new life.

SO, let us pray to the Lord more diligently, with fasting and almsgiving, that the Great Healer of our Souls can heal his Church from this sinful pattern that has marred us for so long and

devastated the lives of so many people. Let us pray above all for the healing of those who have been abused, and for the protection of all who come under our care.

**Lord Jesus, we come before you sinful and sorrowful  
for the children, youth and others who have been hurt and abused  
by the clergy of the Church, either by the horrible acts committed against them  
or by their bishops who have enabled them in any way.  
Liberate us from this scourge by helping us find real solutions to these problems.  
Bless in a special way those who have been abused by a clergyman or Church worker,  
and heal them as only you can.  
Bless and strengthen our good clergy so that they may continue to humbly serve all people,  
especially our youth, with a renewed joy and confidence.  
Forgive us our sins and let us drown them forever in the sea of your love and mercy.  
For you are Lord forever and ever. Amen.**