

CATHOLIC HERALD

www.chnonline.org

HERALD OF HOPE



Reform goes on

Archbishop
Timothy M. Dolan

Three months ago, in this same column, I wrote under the title “Reform, Reconciliation, and Renewal” about the painful scandal of the sexual abuse of minors by clergy, and the efforts and response of the archdiocese.

This crisis was a long time in the making, and, thus, I am afraid, will be a long time in the recovery. So it is good for me to keep you posted about progress being made.

The reform continues to go on. I am immensely grateful to the splendid members of our Archdiocesan Review Board — former Lt. Gov. Margaret Farrow, Donald Schuenke, attorney Hannah Dugan, Dr. Charles Lodl, and Fr. James Connell; and to officials of the archdiocese who, while not members of the board, help staff it — Barbara Anne Cusack, my delegate for issues of sexual abuse, Fr. Joseph Hornacek, Vicar for Clergy, and Fr. Phil Reifenberg, Promoter of Justice. This board advises me on the fitness for ministry of priests or deacons accused of abuse. They have been meeting with diligence and care, rigorously reviewing some past cases, and offering me expert counsel on how to ensure that our pledge is

fulfilled that no priest or deacon against whom there has been a substantiated allegation will ever function again in ministry. We also continue to make sure that those priests who no longer serve are aware of the tight restrictions placed upon them.

The district attorney has, as promised, had access to the names and files of those with substantiated allegations. Of course, now, any charge made against a priest is immediately turned over to proper officials for investigation.

Internally, while respectful of all the rights given to victims and clergy by church law, we are moving to bring resolution to the priestly status of perpetrators, which could, in some cases, mean laicization. At the same time, as much as some criticize us, no priest is to be abandoned or forgotten. In justice, we owe them at least minimal care, and must assure that their rights in law and in the church are respected.

We have also given serious attention to the legislation before our elected officials regarding this whole situation. The bishops of Wisconsin have talked among ourselves, with our legal advisors, and with John Huebscher,

executive director of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference. Here in the archdiocese, I have consulted with the members of the Pastoral Council, the Priests’ Council, and with some victim-survivors and professional care-givers. Valuable as well have been our conversations with leaders of other religions, since this is, of course, far from just a “Catholic” problem. We find ourselves in agreement with the sentiment that the urgency of the situation calls for some reform in the law to help society better protect our children.

Thus, we support the inclusion of clergy as “mandatory reporters” when they hear of the abuse of children, as long as the seal of the confessional (and similar instances of pastoral confidence proper to other faiths) is respected. Our own policy for the last decade has included this reporting requirement, even though it was not imposed by law. Likewise, we are in agreement that the statute of limitations needs to be fairly and moderately extended. What we oppose is the radical retroactive elimination of the statute of limitation, even for a year, convinced that one injustice is not corrected by another, and that it would be next-to-impossible to judge cases of decades ago — with the accused often dead or now elderly — with the fairness required.

We cannot support the desire of some who want to punish the entire church for the criminal actions of those few whose sins, crimes, and abuse were contrary to everything good and decent which the church represents. While strongly committed to doing everything we can do to protect our children, and to bring some sense of justice to those who have suffered, I am also

called to defend the rights of the church, both as an institution but also as a people of faith. Our Catholic people should not have to suffer the loss of key ministries or assume the burden of additional financial sacrifice to compensate for the sinful actions of a few in which they had no part and which they roundly condemn.

You may recall my promise to publicize the complete financial records of the archdiocese, which was done at the end of January in the “To Live Is Christ” newsletter. Any future “settlement” in the courts, or compensation reached in our mediation sessions, will be part of future financial statements. As I have often said, I take stewardship over the money you have generously donated to the church very seriously.

After reform comes reconciliation. Over the last three months, I have met privately with approximately 35 individual victim-survivors (not all abused by clergy). These meetings took place in publicized sessions at Catholic Charities at announced times. Then, some victim-survivors asked for more private, unpublicized meetings, feeling very uncomfortable when other victims invited the media and held press conferences at Catholic Charities at the very time and place where the sessions were occurring.

These individual meetings are always difficult, as I listen again to the anguish of the abuse, and hear how lives of the victims and their families will never be the same. For some, the hurt and anger is such that healing and reconciliation with the church appears futile. But, for many others, their faith and hope is strong, and the church has been an agent of compassion and assistance.

I am relieved to report our process of pastoral mediation is beginning to bear fruit, with a number of victim-survivors having sat down already, and more to do so in the future, to consider concrete ways the church can continue to respond to their spiritual, emotional, and other needs, with openness to “restorative justice,” or fair financial compensation for past hurt.

We have been guided in this mediation process by counsel from experts at Marquette University, which has one of the nation’s leading mediation training programs. We have a slate of trained mediators available, including some proposed by victims. At first we had proposed a process where attorneys would not be at the table, although, from the start, we encouraged all to consult legal counsel before agreeing to any resolution. Now it has become clear that some victims want their attorney present, so we have indicated an openness to this, as long as the mediator, not the lawyer, controls the process.

I am very thankful to dedicated professionals who have accepted my invitation to serve on a “Community Advisory Board” to review and improve the response of the archdiocese to the victim-survivors, especially in the reporting we do, the emotional and spiritual care we offer, and the much needed programs of education and prevention we must continue and initiate. The members include: Maryann Clesceri, Kathy Coffey-Guenther, Scot Edgerton, Marilyn Gierczak, Ginger Halgison, Dominican Sr. Mary Howard Johnstone, Marie Kingsbury, Dr. Anthony Meyer, Dr. Barbara Anne Cusack, Fr. Ross Shecterle, Kathy Walter, Dr. Barbara Reinke, Diane Knight, Scott Weyda, Bishop Richard J.

Skiba, and myself.

Finally, we do see some renewal coming from all of this. Lent is the season of dying and rising. Lord knows there has been so much dying in victims, families, parishes, priests, bishops, and the entire church. It has seemed like one long Good Friday. But Easter is always there. The “Renew program” reports solid spiritual revival, with small groups reflecting on the Bible, praying together, and studying the very nature of the church, and how we have been purified by such crises in the past. One woman wrote how she had fled the church last year, shocked by the scandals, furious at priests and bishops, angry at the whole Body of Christ. The

persuasion of a neighbor led her reluctantly to join Renew, where she reports consolation that she’s not alone, and a reborn faith in Jesus who will keep his promise to be with his church all days. Another observes how “Together we have to accept both the burden and the grace of being church.” Then, too, the thousands who have packed our archdiocesan communal Lenten penance services remark that this whole mess has led to much interior conversion and deeper prayer. Even the number of candidates for entrance into the seminary for the archdiocese this fall is up from last year, as these young men sense the urgency of a call from Jesus to serve him and his church in the enterprise of renewal. The call to a renewal of fidelity to Jesus, his teaching, and his church is heard by many.

I thank God and all of those who have been part of our response. We have a lot of work still to do. I’ll try my best to persevere in this important effort, and to keep you posted.