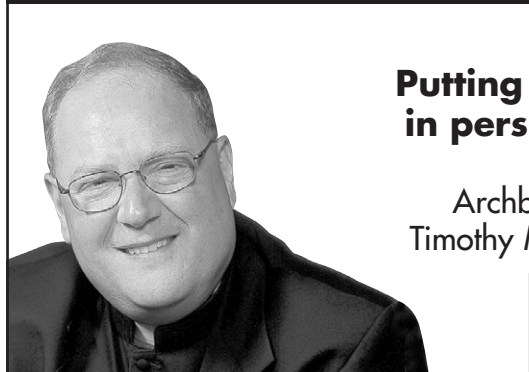


# CATHOLIC HERALD

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## HERALD OF HOPE



### Putting reports in perspective

Archbishop  
Timothy M. Dolan

**F**asten your seat belts! On Friday, February 27, we bishops will release the reports we commissioned a year and a half ago to study the scope and nature of the horrible scandal of the sexual abuse of minors by clergy. The release of these two reports, commissioned by the National Review Board – one, by the John Jay Institute on the number of victims and offenders, and the cost to the Church, and the second, on what led to the crisis – will, I am afraid, "pick open the scab" that was beginning to heal, and push the terrible bad news of the scandal back into the headlines. Yes, I'm afraid we'll be going through this again. In fact, as you know, the "leaks" about what these reports have found are already causing news stories which may not be accurate.

Maybe it will be of assistance if I offer some context to help understand the findings. Keep these facts in mind as everybody else is jumping to conclusions and rushing to judgment.

For one, we bishops commissioned the report. This is not some investigative reporter sniffing out bad news about a defiant church unwilling to cooperate. We bishops pledged to you we would be as honest and forthcoming as possible about this tragedy. We can only begin to restore trust and move

ahead if we fully comprehend the scope and horror of this nightmare. We'd prefer that you hear it from us rather than from someone else. It hurts us all, but will ultimately help us all as we move to reform, renewal and reconciliation. Light heals, darkness hurts. We cannot hold our heads up and begin to walk forward until we have held our heads down in shame.

We are already being blasted by some well-intentioned Catholics for not "putting all this behind us and moving on." Well, we do want to "put it behind us and move on," but we cannot do that until we honestly confront the scope of the horrors, learn from them and vow never to let it get this way again.

"Why do you bishops keep talking about this. Just forget about it," is another comment we hear. We cannot; we must not. One of the lessons we painfully learned is that silence, secrecy and denial only complicated a terrible situation.

Two, the reports cover all priests and deacons for fifty-two years. I do not know what the statistics will be – we will not receive the reports until next week – but I can visualize the headlines now; "Thousands of priests guilty of abusing minors." Keep in mind we're talking about a group of hundreds of thousands of bishops, priests and deacons over a half-

century.

Three, the "news" will actually be "old" for us here in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. We decided over a year ago that we needed to be up-front with you about the number of allegations, and the cost to the archdiocese. We took some heat when we released those statistics last February, last September and just this week, in reports to all 220,000 registered Catholic households in southeastern Wisconsin, but I'm sure glad we did it.

Four, the reports will give us the statistics of every bishop, priest or deacon ever accused, whether the accusation was substantiated or not. From painful experience I can tell you that, tragically, almost all allegations from brave victim-survivors are indeed true, but there have been some that have never been proven and some that have been fraudulent and they are included in the statistics.

Five, if there is any kind of some positive news in all this gloom, it could be that the huge majority of reported abuse came prior to the last fifteen years or so. In this archdiocese, for instance, we have only two substantiated allegations of abuse that took place after 1990. That's two – too many, but it indicates that the abuse is going down, that the prevention and vigilance which began to characterize the Church's response in the late 1980's has been effective and is beginning to eradicate this plague in the Church.

Now, even given this context, what we will learn next Friday will be shocking, sad, sobering and scandalous. There is no way around it. The abuse of our young people by those who dare claim a position of trust and honor is a horrible crime, a perverse sin, a terrible wound on the body of Christ. That leaders in the Church failed to act with justice and rigor in rooting it out is shameful and a betrayal. We have admitted our wrong and

asked for forgiveness.

What we bishops hope will happen is this: tragically, in the past, we have been an example of what not to do in dealing with this tragedy. Now we hope we can begin to be an example of what to do. No other institution in the United States is acting with more resolve and vigor to confront the horror of sexual abuse of minors than the Catholic Church.

Our strict policies to remove guilty clergy, our increased vigilance in the screening of candidates and more demanding formation in seminaries, our background checks of all involved in ministry to young people, the introduction of the VIRTUS program of training and prevention, now mandatory for all our priests, deacons, pastoral workers, teachers and volunteers, the prevention program for children and parents and our efforts – awkward at times – to reach out to victims, can hopefully be an example of what should be done, instead of what should not.

It may have taken us an inexcusable amount of time to get here, but we are now on the road to becoming a leading partner in how society must respond to a tumor that affects all society – families, schools, professions, organizations, athletics – all of society, not just the Church. As Bishop Wilton Gregory has observed, "This may not be the beginning of the end, but at least it's the end of the beginning." If our shame, embarrassment, suffering and scorn can bring about a reform of society to help eradicate this horror, so be it.

This is not the time to pat ourselves on the back, but rather to strike our breast in a "mea culpa." It's part of the "dying and rising" that only has meaning when united with the dying and rising of Jesus. Maybe it's providential these reports will come out as Lent begins.