



A Bitter Time and Its Lessons

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March 11, 2016

Adults have a duty to love and protect children. Yet not a day goes by when we don't hear a story about children abused by someone they know and trust. Perpetrators cover a very wide spectrum, from parents to coaches to teachers to clergy. But especially bitter for the statewide Catholic community is a March 1 grand jury report detailing abuses that took place in western Pennsylvania's Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown.

This news brings back ugly feelings for so many within our own Archdiocese, which learned its own lessons about child sexual abuse the hard way. The most important lesson is that the persons who suffer most in these tragedies are the survivors and their families. I've met personally with many survivors over the years. Their stories and experiences are intensely painful. I am deeply sorry for all they've endured, for the past failures of the Church, and for the role she has played in their suffering.

When I arrived here more than four years ago, we committed the Archdiocese of Philadelphia to do all it can to support survivors on their path toward healing and to create Church and school environments to protect our young people and keep them from harm. My predecessor, Cardinal Rigali, had already started by hiring respected professionals – experts from the victim services and law enforcement communities -- to establish and implement best practices. Their charge was based on two simple requirements: Law enforcement authorities must be notified immediately and properly when any allegation of abuse is made; and survivors need to be cared for professionally and with compassion.

We've made progress. Today, the Archdiocese has a zero tolerance policy for clergy, lay employees and volunteers who engage in misconduct with children, and it takes immediate action when an accusation is made. Any allegation of abuse must be reported immediately to law enforcement, and any substantiated allegation against a member of the clergy results in immediate removal from ministry.

Every year, our Victim Assistance Program offers substantial support to individuals and families. During the 2014-2015 fiscal year alone, the Archdiocese dedicated more than \$1.7 million to underwrite counseling, to provide medication, to eliminate barriers to receiving support such as travel and childcare, and provided other forms of support to survivors and their families.

Parents and families need to have confidence that their children are protected. To meet that need, members of our Archdiocese play an important role every day in creating safe environments for

anyone who participates in our parish, school, service or recreational activities. Our Office for Child and Youth Protection provides mandatory training and educational efforts to clergy, staff and volunteers on how to recognize improper conduct and report abuse or inappropriate behavior.

Since 2003, more than 92,000 adults in our Archdiocesan community have received training to recognize, respond to and report child abuse. And every year, more than 100,000 children receive age-appropriate abuse prevention education. These efforts are constantly reviewed, improved and built upon. Next month, we launch a new education program in our diocesan schools, grades 9-12, focused on healthy relationships called *TeenTalk: Lessons to Empower Youth in a Modern World*.

We know that preventing new cases of abuse requires vigilance. We're blessed by the dedication of more than 280 designated Safe Environment Coordinators who work in our parishes, schools and ministries to ensure compliance with laws and our own Archdiocesan policies. Even before Pennsylvania law recently changed as a result of the work of the Task Force on Child Protection, the Archdiocese had already required all people working with children, including volunteers, to undergo background checks and child abuse clearances, attend safe environment and mandated reporter training programs, as well as report any suspicions of child abuse to the proper legal authorities.

This is a huge task, and I'm grateful to all of our Safe Environment Coordinators and everyone in our parishes and schools for the work they do on the front lines, for their valuable input to our Office for Child and Youth Protection, and most importantly for their advocacy on behalf of our diocesan children. Their efforts have woven safety, prevention and healing into the fabric of our diocesan life.

As part of our continued efforts, next month we will join with many others to mark Child Abuse Prevention Month with special events and education programs. But our work of helping survivors heal, protecting our people and purifying the Church will go on – permanently.