



DIOCESE OF HARRISBURG - OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

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My Dear Friends in Christ,

As the Season of Lent approaches, our thoughts turn to the three traditional actions of this time of preparation for rebirth at Easter: prayer, acts of charity, and penance. This coming week brings not only the beginning of Lent, but also a report on clergy sexual abuse of minors in the Catholic Church in the United States. By this letter and other methods of helping you to understand this report, I encourage you to keep in mind the larger context of what our Church is all about: fallen humanity reborn in Christ. When we are confronted with the reality of sin, we must always remember that sin was ultimately defeated by the Cross of Jesus. Faith, hope, and love are our guiding virtues, not despair.

On Friday of next week, the results will be released of a nation-wide study of the extent of the sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy. The scope of this study is unprecedented. No other church or organization, and no other profession, has undergone the scrutiny of a study as intensive and sweeping as this. It is unthinkable that this was necessary, and it is a reminder that sin bears tragic consequences for us all. To keep us from diverting our attention from those who suffer the most by the reality of this sin, I have asked that every parish and mission in the diocese offer a Mass on Ash Wednesday for the intention of those persons who have been victimized by sexual abuse in any form. It is our purpose as a Church to surround the hurting with our love, and to hold them in our hearts, praying to God for their healing and peace.

This is perhaps the most important thing to remember as you hear the results of the study: in the midst of sin, and indeed because of the reality of sin in our world, the work of the Church has never ceased or diminished. The hungry are being fed, the naked are being clothed, the grieving are being consoled, the sick being cared for tenderly, and the sinner is being reconciled to God's grace.

This week's edition of our diocesan newspaper, *The Catholic Witness*, has provided what I hope will be helpful insights as you read and hear the results of the national study. This weekend we provided to the local media an update on our diocesan statistics: how many reports of misconduct we have received, and how much has been spent on providing an effective response to this terrible sin. The numbers are large, but the embrace of our loving God is broader still, and all the good work accomplished by faithful priests can never be reported in a newspaper or television news story.

Pray for all who have been hurt by abuse, no matter who was the perpetrator. Pray that they might accept the healing of God and the warm embrace of a welcoming Church. Pray also for the holy and hard-working priests who serve faithfully every day. Sacred Scripture teaches us "where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more." When this week you hear of the heinous sins of a few, do not be distracted from the wonderful work of so many others. We have been honest in facing the truth of this sin, but always with the awareness of larger truths: the fundamental goodness and holiness of God's people, the mercy of God, and the faithful ministry of our priests.

By the Lenten acts of prayer, acts of charity, and penance, we are reminded that we can trust deeply in the protection and providence of God. May God bless you and your loved ones in the approaching Season of Lent.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+Nicholas C. Dattilo

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Bishop of Harrisburg