

What is the Church Doing to Address the Problem?

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Diocese of Juneau

A number of years ago on a Monday morning during the third week of Lent, I celebrated Mass prior to beginning my day of work at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in Washington, DC. In praying the opening prayer, I was struck by the poignancy of the words and how much they related to the clergy sexual abuse scandals which we were addressing in our work at the USCCB. The prayer read, “God of mercy, free your church from sin and protect it from evil. Guide us, for we cannot be saved without you.” I went to work that day thinking about that prayer. I reflected upon it throughout the day. A colleague walked into my office and I started to tell him about this prayer and how much I felt that it truly captured how I felt regarding the whole sexual abuse scandals by clergy. We engaged in a lengthy conversation about sin in the Church and the various evils that afflict us as individuals and how such evils permeate the Church, too. When my colleague left the Bishops’ Conference to take a position in one of our major seminaries, he gave me a gift prior to his departure. It was an engraved wooden plaque with those words of the opening prayer for Monday, the third week of Lent.

Over these past couple weeks we have been hearing reports of child sexual abuse by clergy throughout the world. It seems as though it is impossible to check the news without seeing some reference to clergy sexual abuse in the Church. In light of this, I want to spend some time addressing this issue with you. It is important for me to share with you the work that is being done to secure a safe environment for our young people within our parishes of Southeast Alaska. The Diocese of Juneau is in compliance with the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*. This *Charter* was first established in 2002 and it serves as guidelines for creating the safe environment a our children. In addition to a safe environment, the *Charter* directs action on healing and reconciliation of victims and survivors; making prompt and effective response to allegations; reporting to and cooperating with civil authorities; disciplining offenders; providing for means of accountability for the future by way of establishing a Diocesan Review Board; and participating in audits conducted by an outside source to ensure compliance with the *Charter*.

In order to give you some perspective on what has been done to bring this *Charter* into a reality in the United States, allow me to offer you some facts provided by the USCCB. Safe Environment training is taking place in 193 dioceses/eparchies of the country. Over 2 million adults have been trained to recognize the behavior of offenders and what to do about it. Background checks are conducted on Church personnel who have contact with children. Over 2 million volunteers and employees; 52,000 clerics; 6,205 candidates for ordination have had their backgrounds evaluated. All dioceses/eparchies have Codes of Conduct spelling out what is acceptable behavior. This serves to let people know what can and cannot be done as well as letting others know what behavior can be expected. It encourages the reporting of suspicious behavior. All dioceses/eparchies have Victim Assistance Coordinators, assuring victims that they will be heard. In 2009, \$6,536,109 was spent on therapy for the victims of clergy sexual abuse. All dioceses/eparchies have Safe Environment Coordinators who assure the ongoing compliance to the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*. There has been a Zero Tolerance policy on abusers since 2002. If a credible accusation is made against a cleric, he is permanently removed from ministry regardless of how long ago the offense occurred. And, dioceses require intensive background screening as well as psychological testing for those wishing to enter the seminary.

Here in the Diocese of Juneau, Ms. Robbie Izzard serves as our Diocesan Safe Environment Coordinator. In addition to verifying that all our priests, staff people, catechists and volunteers are current with their clearance to work with children, we also have verification that all visiting priests who come to the Diocese of Juneau are in good standing and comply with the *Charter*. Through the Apostleship of the Sea (the Church’s agency that

oversees the priest chaplains on cruise ships), we are assured that the priests who serve as chaplains on the many cruise ships in Southeast Alaska are also in compliance with the *Charter*.

With the reports of Church scandals in the media, I wanted to be sure to let you know about all the work the Church is doing nationally and here in Southeast Alaska. The Diocese of Juneau will remain diligent in keeping our children safe and I will continue to pray the prayer from the wooden plaque that hangs in the chapel of my residence, "God of mercy, free your Church from sin and protect it from evil. Guide us, for we cannot be saved without you."