

Our Church's Response to Sexual Abuse  
Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz, D.D.  
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As you hear and see frequent news reports of the sexual abuse of children by clergy and the questions being asked of many in Church leadership, including our Holy Father, you may feel baffled, angry, and discouraged. Here at the Archdiocese, our staff has received emails and phone calls from faithful Catholics who are in great pain. As we all try to process this very difficult situation, let me offer a few reflections on how we have been able to respond locally and where we need to improve.

First I want to address all those who as children were sexually abused by those within the Church and beyond. Since statistics reveal that one out of every four women and one out of every seven men experience sexual abuse by the time that they are 18, I realize that many among our fellow parishioners, neighbors, colleagues, friends, and family have been sexually abused as children or adolescents.

I cannot begin to imagine the pain you suffer and the lifelong effects that you must deal with because of the terrible evil that was committed against you. I am deeply sorry for the times when our own Church—by denial, by apathy, or by placing blame elsewhere—added to your pain and caused you to feel revictimized. Please know that we are in solidarity with you, and your wound is our wound.

We can only be healthy as a Church and as a society if we honestly confront the sexual abuse of children and rebuild relationships one at a time. I have been inspired by those who have already come forward, and I encourage all victims of sexual abuse and all those who know of any abuse to seek help and to contact law enforcement. I know our pastors, counselors, and all in pastoral ministry stand ready to reach out and support you.

I remember the Dallas meeting of the United States Catholic Bishops eight years ago when we discussed and adopted the "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People." As a relatively new bishop, I had never faced such a difficult pastoral challenge.

Despite this challenge, I have experienced the "Charter" as a solid and clear guide to firm pastoral decisions that need to be made when someone who has been abused by a member of the clergy or other church employee contacts our Archdiocese. The Charter correctly places priority on outreach to victims, and the position of victim assistance coordinator called for by the Charter is ably held by Dr. Tom Robbins. Dr. Robbins can be reached at [trobbsins@archlou.org](mailto:trobbsins@archlou.org) or by calling 502/636-1044.

The Charter also addresses those who have been accused of abuse. It helped us to develop clear policies that prevent anyone with a substantiated accusation of the sexual abuse of a minor from continuing in Church ministry or employment.

The Charter mandated changes in our systems, including the creation of a Sexual Abuse Review Board, composed primarily of lay experts who are not employed by the Church, to guide us in dealing with accusations of sexual abuse. Our Review Board consists of wise and professional men and women who have served us very well, and I am grateful for their advice and counsel.

The Charter calls for the requirement that all Church employees and volunteers who work with children receive training on the nature, dynamics, and prevention of childhood sexual abuse. We know these programs begin the process of protecting children by raising awareness about child abuse. In fact at many of our training sessions, persons have come forward about abuse they suffered themselves or that they are aware of. In addition, safe environment training programs help adults recognize grooming techniques that are precursors to abuse.

This education and training are enhanced and supplemented by “safety barriers” in the form of codes of conduct, age-appropriate education for children, background checks, reporting requirements, independent audits, and written policies, all of which build a safer system for the children in our care. As of this writing, more than 23,000 adults in our Archdiocese have received safe environment training. For more information about our policies and education/prevention efforts, please visit [www.archlou.org/restoringtrust](http://www.archlou.org/restoringtrust).

The Bishops made another important decision in 2002. Recognizing that sexual abuse is a systemic problem and that good solutions can only be grounded in accurate research and data, the Bishops enlisted the John Jay College of Criminology in New York to carry out two studies, the first dealing with the scope and nature of sexual abuse and the second with the causes and context of sexual abuse in the Church.

The second study is ongoing, but we have learned that incidences of abuse in the United States predominated in the 1960s to early 1980s. While the studies indicate that the sins of priests and other church leaders sadly fit into larger societal trends, the more recent efforts in seminaries to concentrate on human formation and skills in maintaining proper boundaries for leaders seem to have proven beneficial.

It is a troubling indictment that Church leadership, called to holiness, did not provide an example for all of society in dealing with sexual abuse, and we need to admit that we were wrong in some of the actions taken in the past. We can point to all kinds of explanations for these decisions, but the first step in any process of reconciliation and healing lies in admitting the wrongs that happened.

I also think we should acknowledge the role of the media in calling us to accountability and the firm resolve that is expressed in the Charter. At times, I have disagreed with the tone, approach, and extent of the media coverage, but the media did not cause this crisis. I hope that what we have learned from our failures will assist others within and beyond the Church as we all work to address this terrible tragedy of sexual abuse.

I also would like to thank the many clergy, religious, and lay persons who serve our Church and our communities by creating and nurturing the safe environments that parents have a right to expect. These faithful servants need our prayers and support.

Ultimately it is vitally important for our Church to continue to improve and embrace accountability in our efforts to protect children and in all areas of Church life. This requires humility and a call for conversion, penance, and purification that is never easy. Like a family who experiences severe and challenging problems, we must honestly and lovingly face these. I ask you to join me in seeking forgiveness for the sins of members who have misused authority and to work with me in efforts to protect all God’s children. May God’s grace guide us.