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**Archbishop José H. Gomez**

## Protection of children — everyone's duty of love

April is a month in which we are all called to be mindful of protection of children. This is a time when our communities must rededicate themselves to seeking effective measures to provide safe environment for children. A time when our churches, schools and institutions reaffirm that they must be more than just places of safety, they must be places of trust and love.

It has been five years since the Catholic bishops of the United States crafted the “Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People.” These years have been filled with an uncommon combination of pain and progress, as the church, through an institutional examination of conscience, has sought reconciliation with those who have been so deeply hurt by the sins of some clergy who exploited a child’s innocence. In our search for reconciliation and healing, we have come to understand the nature and the breadth of this terrible evil that pervades all segments of society. We have also strengthened our resolve to ensure that every Catholic institution is a harbor, where every child can be safe from fear and abuse.

I recognize that no program or policy, no single person or institution can guarantee the safety of every child. However, the Archdiocese of San Antonio’s policies and procedures are driven by the conviction that education is a critical weapon against abuse. We have undertaken this plan, unequaled by any other organization or institution in Texas, to protect our children and make a meaningful impact in their lives. Since the implementation of the Charter in 2002, our Office of Victim Assistance and Safe Environment has supervised the training of more than 70,000 children and youth with age appropriate skills to know what to do if a person attempts inappropriate advances. We have trained over 13,000 parents, 786 clergy, 2,555 educators, 3,312 diocesan and parish employees and 3,445 volunteers.

Abuse of children is clearly of epidemic proportions in our entire society. Addressing the widespread problem of child abuse, a recent San Antonio Express-News editorial stated, “Crimes against children aren’t only a parent’s worst nightmare. They are society’s worst nightmare. The youngest among us are also the most vulnerable.” In 2006, according to Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services’ statistics, 5,755 minors were victims of abuse, including physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect and sexual abuse. No school, no institution, no family, yes, and no church is immune to these nightmares of personal tragedy.

Victims of abuse can never be reduced to numbers. Each abuse is a human tragedy. Each victim’s story is unique. I recognize that we cannot change the pain of history; we cannot undo the harm that has been done by some clergy and others who have abused our beloved children. As church, we must ask for forgiveness and continue to reach out to each individual with compassion and love, seeking reconciliation and healing of their broken hearts. We hope that many other institutions will also assure all children with a safe environment.

As our society searches for remedies to the wider epidemic of abuse throughout our communities, the Texas legislature is proposing criminal background checks for all public school employees and employees of contractors working on school grounds. This is already an established policy in the Archdiocese of San Antonio. All clergy and employees must be screened. Volunteers in the archdiocese who directly minister, work or volunteer with minors and/or vulnerable persons must be screened. Our policy also includes contractors. Any person who does not submit to a required criminal background check will not be permitted to minister, work or volunteer.

Recently, in a homily I delivered at the funeral of two sweet, innocent babies, whose lives were brought to an awful end, I said, "My brothers and sisters, for our own sake and the sake of our children, we need to change. We need to pray, to respect life, marriage and family and center our life in God. We're children of God, and our most important gift is his love. God has blessed us. We need to be a blessing for others." I recognize that, as church, we must be a blessing to all victims of abuse, their families and our community.

***Let us pray that Mary, our Blessed Mother, will hold all those who have suffered abuse, especially our children, close to her heart so that each will feel the gentle warmth of God's love and peace.***

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