

U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Administrative Committee Statement on Sex Abuse Scandals; Committee Releases Actions to be Taken Within Its Authority

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) Administrative Committee has issued the following statement today in response to the recent sex abuse scandals. In the statement, the bishops say they pledge to "heal and protect with every bit of the strength God provides us."

Turning to the Lord

"When each of us was ordained as a bishop, we were told:

'Keep watch over the whole flock in which the Holy Spirit has appointed you to shepherd the Church of God.'

We, the Administrative Committee of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, assembled last week in Washington at this time of shame and sorrow. Some bishops, by their actions or their failures to act, have caused great harm to both individuals and the Church as a whole. They have used their authority and power to manipulate and sexually abuse others. They have allowed the fear of scandal to replace genuine concern and care for those who have been victimized by abusers. For this, we again ask forgiveness from both the Lord and those who have been harmed. Turning to the Lord for strength, we must and will do better.

The Administrative Committee took the following actions within its authority:

1. Approved the establishment of a third-party reporting system that will receive confidentially, by phone and online, complaints of sexual abuse of minors by a bishop and sexual harassment of or sexual misconduct with adults by a bishop and will direct those complaints to the appropriate ecclesiastical authority and, as required by applicable law, to civil authorities.
2. Instructed the USCCB Committee on Canonical Affairs and Church Governance to develop proposals for policies addressing restrictions on bishops who were removed or resigned because of allegations of sexual abuse of minors or sexual harassment of or misconduct with adults, including seminarians and priests.
3. Initiated the process of developing a Code of Conduct for bishops regarding the sexual abuse of a minor; sexual harassment of or sexual misconduct with an adult; or negligence in the exercise of his office related to such cases.
4. Supported a full investigation into the situation surrounding Archbishop McCarrick, including his alleged assaults on minors, priests, and seminarians, as well any responses made to those allegations. Such an investigation should rely upon lay experts in relevant fields, such as law enforcement and social services.

This is only a beginning. Consultation with a broad range of concerned parents, experts, and other laity along with clergy and religious will yield additional, specific measures to be taken to repair the scandal and restore justice. We humbly welcome and are grateful for the assistance of the whole people of God in holding us accountable.

As these initiatives get underway, the Administrative Committee invites each of our brother bishops to join us in acts of prayer and penance. This is a time of deep examination of conscience for each bishop. We cannot content ourselves that our response to sexual assault within the Church has been sufficient. Scripture must be our guide forward, "be doers of the word and not hearers only" (James 1:22).

In all of this, we do not want anyone – ourselves included – to lose sight of those who have suffered from those who have acted or failed to act as the Gospel demanded. For survivors of sexual abuse, these days may re-open deep wounds. Support is available from the Church and within the community. Victims Assistance Coordinators are available in every diocese to help you find resources. We are grateful to hundreds of dedicated people who, since the adoption of the 2002 Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, have been working with the Church to support survivors and prevent future abuse.

To anyone who has been abused, never hesitate to also contact local law enforcement. If you don't feel comfortable for any reason with the Church providing help, your diocese can connect you with appropriate community services. With compassion and without judgement, the bishops of the United States pledge to heal and protect with every bit of the strength God provides us.

Acting in communion with the Holy Father, with whom we once again renew our love, obedience, and loyalty, we make our own the prayer of Pope Francis in his August 20 letter to the people of God, "May the Holy Spirit grant us the grace of conversion and the interior anointing needed to express before these crimes of abuse our compunction and our resolve courageously to combat them."