

By WILTON D. GREGORY, Archbishop of Atlanta

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ATLANTA— “As shepherd of the Catholic Church in Atlanta and united with my brother bishops under Pope Francis in service to Jesus Christ and His Church, I express my profound anger, sadness, and distress concerning sexual abuse by Church leaders of children, young people and those over whom they exercised authority. My anger and disappointment, shared by Catholics and others, are only heightened by the reality that leaders who have engaged in or neglected to protect others from such damaging and deviant behavior have for many years failed to be held accountable — and have even risen in leadership positions. We must do better — for the sake of all victims and survivors of sexual abuse, and for the sake of everyone whom we serve in the name of Jesus Christ.

“Catholics everywhere, myself among them, are stunned and justifiably angry at shameful, unrelenting recent revelations of bishops accused of abuse or mishandling allegations of abuse — behavior that offends and scandalizes the people of God entrusted to our care. Specifically, we are enraged by the actions of Theodore McCarrick, the disgraced former Cardinal. We also recognize that any pastoral negligence in protecting our people is similarly grievous, and we’ve recently seen alarming reports alleging such rampant reckless disregard in Chile, Australia, Honduras, Guam, and other places around the globe.

“We are weary of this cloud of shame that continues to shroud Church leadership and compromise our mission. I am personally disheartened because in 2002 I stood before the body of bishops and the people of God as President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and made assurances in my own name and that of the Church in the United States that this crisis of faith and leadership was over and would not be repeated. I sincerely believed that the unprecedented steps we took at that time would help to heal this wound in the Body of Christ. And so they have, though obviously not completely or even sufficiently.

“I am saddened because once again our many good and generous ordained ministers of the Gospel are seen as suspect not because they have done anything wrong — indeed, our charter and norms forcefully apply when allegations are made against them — but because those charged with assuring the faithful of their fitness for ministry have. People everywhere are disillusioned because the Church’s bishops are seen as failing in our responsibility to govern, to sanctify, and to teach, as Christ would have us.

“I am hurt because my respect and fraternal esteem for Theodore McCarrick were clearly misplaced. I never personally worked with him in any pastoral context, having only encountered him as a fellow member of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, but his public devotion to the Church’s social justice agenda was highly regarded. I never knew or suspected the hidden side of a man whose admired public persona concealed that of a violator of foundational Christian morality and of young people who trusted him. Like any individual who discovers far too late that a friend has a history of moral misconduct, I now stand dumbfounded that I was so unaware and naïve. I know that many other bishops feel the same.

Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory's statements on Abuse by the Clergy

“People are angry, as well they should be, that our Church is once again viewed as a haven for criminal deviant behavior. I know our priests are hurt that they are again being judged with a jaundiced eye, as perhaps too dangerous to be trusted with the Church’s children. Our people are disappointed with bishops in general who seemingly cannot or will not act decisively to heal this festering wound. They are perplexed and sickened that the Holy See may well have dismissed multiple warning signs that should have halted Theodore McCarrick and others earlier in their careers. They are disheartened that situations both here in the United States and in other countries continue to dominate social media and call into question everything the Church has done to safeguard children and adults from manipulation and violation.

“Several days ago I met with our Archdiocesan seminarians during their annual convocation. I told them directly and specifically that if any person in any context made advances or exhibited behavior that made them feel uncomfortable or threatened, they are to notify the Director of Vocations, one of the Auxiliary Bishops or me personally so that we may take swift and appropriate action — pastoral and legal. Their parents and family members should know that these young men are in safe and respectful environments, and that, as their Archbishop, I will not tolerate any activity that threatens to harm or intimidate them.

“While the current leadership of the USCCB considers next steps, I strongly encourage that they engage the laity in reviewing and recommending courses of action that will assure the faithful that we are serious in curing this blight from our Church and from episcopal governance once and for all.

“When we first established a national lay review board in 2002, conference leadership faced pushback because some felt that we were improperly ceding control of the ministry of bishops. Given the situation we face today, oversight by laity may well provide the only credible assurance that real and decisive actions are being taken. Our trustworthiness as bishops has been so seriously compromised that acting alone — even with the best of intentions and the highest principles, policies and plans — may not move the hearts of the faithful to believe.

“I pray that this moment, and these days, weeks, and months ahead, will be an opportunity for light to break through the darkness, and for darkness to be exposed to the light. I pray that all victims and survivors of sexual abuse will come forward and receive the help, support, and healing they need. And I pray that our Church and our leadership will be renewed and transformed by the light of Christ and have the courage to take the necessary next steps.

“Like so many of you I am angry, but I am not overcome by despair. I hope and I pray that the Holy Spirit will cleanse and strengthen the Church. My anger has not led me to hopelessness; I pray yours has not either. I am grateful for your witness of faith and hope, even in difficult times.”

A Word to the faithful of the Archdiocese of Atlanta

By WILTON D. GREGORY, Archbishop of Atlanta | Published August 16, 2018

My heart and the hearts of our archdiocesan faith community are with the people of God in Pennsylvania and throughout the country. We grieve with the victim-survivors and their loved ones, especially those who were disbelieved, neglected, or ignored when they came forward to tell Church officials of their torment. We pray for all who have been traumatized and dispirited by these revelations, and for faithful clergy who must bear this shame moving forward. Absolutely nothing can dispense the culpability of those who have harmed and violated our people in the name of religion, nor those who concealed knowledge of those horrific acts. Catholics and people of good will everywhere have been scandalized again by these events.

All Catholics, including so many good and generous priests, are rightly angered, confused, and embarrassed by this testimony that the leadership of the Church failed to care for our people with compassion and honesty. To you and to all victim-survivors and their loved ones, I pledge my commitment in this Archdiocese and as a member of the body of bishops in this country to take whatever next steps are necessary to ensure vigilance and accountability and to foster healing.

While much has been done in the Church in the United States to advance the protection of children, youth, and all who are vulnerable, the revelations over the last several days and weeks have proven that not enough has been done. For this reason, and to beg for the mercy of God, for His healing, and for the courage of bishops and Church leadership to take the next steps, today I led a Holy Hour with our priests at St. Dominic Chapel in the chancery, and I encouraged those who could not attend to do the same in their parishes at that time.

May Jesus continue to send the cleansing and purifying fire of the Holy Spirit upon us all.

Archdiocese of Atlanta 24-Hour Abuse Reporting Line: 1-888-437-0764

Archbishop answers Catholics' questions on abuse

By WILTON D. GREGORY, Archbishop of Atlanta | Published November 1, 2018

ATLANTA—In the weeks since scandals related to former Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick and troubling revelations of heinous abuse in six Pennsylvania dioceses have come to light in the national media, many parishioners in churches across the Atlanta Archdiocese have met together for prayer and to share their concerns in an open or town hall format. Questions from these sessions have been sent from local parishes to Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory, who answered these and more.

Following are the first and second installments of such questions and answers, representing many of the topics about which people want to know more. More Q&As from Archbishop Gregory will be featured in future issues of The Georgia Bulletin.

If your parish conversations have generated additional questions not answered here, please submit them to your parish office and have them sent to Archbishop Gregory's office at the Chancery in Smyrna.

Questions from Oct. 4

When leaders of our faith are involved in scandals and cover-ups, and those responsible have not always been held accountable or punished, how can we communicate and defend our Catholic faith to our children and to those who do not share our faith?

Our Catholic faith is not based on any individual beyond Jesus Christ Himself. Throughout the history of the Church, there have been dishonest and immoral clerics and the faith of the Church has endured and in fact increased. The Church, like other institutions, has an identity beyond the character of individuals. We are a Church of sinners and saints. The same Church that is now suffering from the horrible activities of some individuals is also the Church who has produced great saints in every age, culture and nation. The difference from other institutions is that the Church is both divine and human, founded by our Lord for the sake of the Gospel and the salvation of the human race. Jesus did not promise that the lives of Christians and of the Church's leaders would be free from sin and evil. What He did promise was the Holy Spirit, His continued presence and guidance of the Church, and that the gates of Hell would not prevail against the Church, despite any evil within and without. Our trust is in the Lord.

What steps will you take immediately to put together a lay review board?

The Archdiocese of Atlanta has had a predominantly lay Advisory Board since 2002. This board meets with me quarterly and includes laypersons with legal and therapeutic expertise, as well as an individual who has had personal experience of a family member who has been abused. There is always one priest assigned to the board to bring a pastoral perspective. Allegations involving clergy who have served or are serving in the Archdiocese are immediately relayed to the Advisory Board. Allegations involving lay employees and volunteers are reviewed through our Office of Human Resources and our Office of Child and Youth Protection. Every allegation is turned over to civil authorities. The importance of this review board and the leadership of the laity cannot be overstated. I am continuing to consult with our Advisory Board and other laity about further steps the Archdiocese can take to continue to advance a culture of transparency, accountability, and safe environments for all.

Are there individuals with substantiated allegations of sexual abuse of minors currently in ministry within the Archdiocese of Atlanta?

There is no cleric currently serving in the Archdiocese of Atlanta who has a substantiated claim of the abuse of a minor. During my service as your Archbishop, every allegation of the sexual abuse of a minor by a member of the clergy has been reviewed by our Advisory Board, comprised primarily of lay people, and immediately reported to civil authorities. When an allegation against a cleric who is a member of a religious order has been raised, the religious authority has been notified and, where the allegation has been substantiated, the cleric has been dismissed from service in the Archdiocese of Atlanta. There have been historical cases that predate my service and these too have been reviewed by the Advisory Board. In all cases, we have reached out to those who have raised the allegations with an offer of counseling and/or other assistance.

Questions from Oct. 18

With all the movement of archdiocesan clergy, how can a parish be certain they are not receiving an individual against whom there are allegations of past misconduct with minors, not brought to justice or protected with a cover-up? It is our understanding in the past that some clergy have been put back into positions that put children at risk.

Simply stated, no priest against whom there has ever been a substantiated allegation of abuse of a minor is permitted to serve in pastoral ministry in the Archdiocese of Atlanta. Additionally, every visiting cleric granted authorization to serve (known as faculties) in the Archdiocese of Atlanta beyond a period of eight days must present a document attesting to his suitability from his local bishop or, in the case of a member of a religious order, his Provincial. The priest must undergo a criminal background check and successfully complete the archdiocesan safe environment program. This includes priests from outside the United States seeking authorization to work in the Archdiocese of Atlanta. For clerics visiting Atlanta for a specific pastoral activity (a wedding, baptism, or funeral, for instance) requiring a stay of less than eight days, a letter of suitability from their bishop or Provincial is sufficient.

What types of mental evaluations are administered on seminarians to detect predatory tendencies? Are clergy reevaluated throughout their careers?

Every candidate for the seminary must undergo a series of significant psychological tests before being accepted for seminary formation. Throughout his seminary program, there are multiple occasions wherein a candidate is reviewed and evaluated further. Once a cleric is ordained, he enjoys a stable position within the local Church, but ongoing support is vital, as it is for any leader and disciple. Our Archdiocese uses a group of priests called Vicars to review a priest's emotional, psychological, and physical well-being, as well as his ongoing healthy human development and performance. Healthy, holy friendships and fraternal accountability among priests are key ingredients to supporting the life and ministry of our priests, in addition to the support they receive from the laity.

Please guide us with hope in understanding how this happened, what is being done today within the Archdiocese of Atlanta and how your faithful people can assist in purifying our Church.

We are still a young diocese (established only 62 years ago in 1956) and our history, while not flawless, has a proud legacy of service, outreach to the poor, educating our youth, and sanctifying our people. This growth and development is not the sole or even primary consequence of the efforts

of clerics and religious, but is also the result of the hard and generous work of lay people who have supported and engaged in the work of the Holy Spirit active in these 69 north and central counties of the State of Georgia.

I encourage every Catholic to engage in efforts to prevent abuse and reduce the opportunity for abuse both in your parish and in your community. Volunteer as a monitor in your parish school of religion. Complete the archdiocesan safe environment training even if you do not work with children, and then consider becoming a trainer. It is the responsibility of every adult to do all they can to keep our young people safe. I also thank families and parents especially for their heroic work in fostering safe environments in their homes and neighborhoods, and for learning about how you can protect your children and form them to live healthy, holy and chaste lives. The culture today is even more difficult than the culture of yesterday, especially in view of the challenges of technology, pornography and violence. We must work together—families, parishes, and schools—in educating and forming our young people in their walk of discipleship and fostering safe environments everywhere in this Archdiocese.

Question from Nov. 1

Do you believe the church's stand on celibacy contributes to the sexual abuse problem and do you think altering that stand would reduce the occurrence of sexual abuse?

Celibacy brings its own dynamics into the life of a cleric, with both blessings and challenges. However, celibacy is not the problem here. For instance, it does not explain how the criminal sexual abuse of minors occurs so frequently within families or in environments where the perpetrators are, in fact, married or non-celibate.

Priests are called to accept celibacy freely as a gift and responsibility in order to be configured more closely to Jesus Christ. Society's problems are multifaceted and include failures in chastity and in healthy integration of one's sexuality, failures in leadership as seen in the abuse of power and ultimately, failures in fidelity and discipleship. However, even these human failures are a far cry from the criminal sexual abuse of minors. The Church must be continually renewed and purified, and this includes a renewal of all those who vow to live a life of celibacy and virginity as well as a renewal of those who live the vocation of marriage, family life and good citizenship. We must all live our vocations faithfully to the Lord, according to our state of life.

Priests, Deacons, Seminarians & Religious with Credible Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors

The Archdiocese of Atlanta is committed to the protection of minors, as well as to compliance with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People. In a spirit of transparency and the hope of continued healing for the survivors of abuse, I have decided to release the list of the priests, deacons, seminarians and religious credibly accused of sexual abuse of a minor. The list below was compiled from the best information available to us at this time, and covers the period from the establishment of the Diocese of Atlanta in 1956 (we became an archdiocese in 1962) until now.

The list is divided into three parts:

1. Priests and others under the direct authority of the Archdiocese of Atlanta where a credible allegation of sexual abuse has been made involving conduct within the Archdiocese
2. Priests and others under the direct authority of a Religious Order, but assigned to the Atlanta Archdiocese where a credible allegation of sexual abuse has been made involving conduct within the Archdiocese
3. Priests and others where the Archdiocese of Atlanta has not received an allegation of sexual abuse regarding conduct within the Archdiocese, but where a credible allegation of sexual abuse has been made against them elsewhere

The list of credibly accused clergy has been prepared based on the recommendation of the Archdiocesan Review Board, which is composed of members who are laypersons and not in the employ of the archdiocese. This board serves to advise the diocesan/eparchial bishop in his assessment of allegations of sexual abuse of minors as well as in his determination of a cleric's suitability for ministry following an allegation of abuse. It also assists in reviews of diocesan/eparchial policies and procedures for dealing with sexual abuse of minors.

The list below will be updated if new credible allegations of sexual abuse of a minor are determined.

Along with the publication of this information, I also renew my apology for the damage that young lives have suffered and the profound sorrow and anger that our families have endured. It is a response in faith that must accompany this listing.