

June 1, 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Just a few weeks ago, Wisconsin Attorney General Josh Kaul issued a press release and held a news conference to announce that he was launching a review of old reports of clergy abuse within the Catholic Church. It is with sorrow and regret that once again I have to write to you on this topic. When we received the request, I asked my staff to meet with the Attorney General to find a pathway for him to lawfully achieve his goal. We believe we have offered a way to provide what the Attorney General has requested while continuing to walk with survivors, maintaining the Church's rights and avoiding unnecessary expense.

The Church continues to pray for abuse survivors and keep their needs a priority. Since 1989, the Archdiocese of Milwaukee has continuously provided outreach to abuse survivors, arranged for therapy and made available counseling to survivors and their families. We have continued to work with abuse survivors to improve the Church's response to those who have been harmed, and we have also put stringent preventative measures in place. In addition, we have supported extending the statute of limitations to allow more time for prosecution of offenders, and the Archdiocese of Milwaukee has provided more than \$50 million in direct payments to individual abuse survivors.

We can never apologize enough, and I am so sincerely sorry for what happened to these individuals. The abuse they suffered was not their fault. It was the fault of criminals who used the sanctity of the priesthood to commit crimes, and I am sick to my stomach when I think about it. Never could I have imagined when I became a priest that such behavior could have occurred.

As the Attorney General launches this very public effort, it's also important to remember all the work that has already been done. For example, all the names of diocesan priests with a substantiated allegation of sexual abuse of a minor were posted on our website in 2004. The list has been updated, and more documents added for full transparency.

The Catholic Church is the largest provider of Safe Environment programs in Wisconsin, and this mandatory education means nearly 100,000 individuals have been trained to recognize potential abuse/abusers and have heightened awareness of this societal scourge. Furthermore, criminal background checks are required for all bishops, priests, deacons, staff and volunteers working with children. Independent reporting mechanisms are in place so people can report suspected behavior.

On a personal level, I have continued the practice started by my predecessor of meeting with abuse survivors and their families. I have heard their stories and understand why the vast majority of abuse survivors do not want public attention. I am always moved at our annual Mass of Atonement, a beautiful and spiritual expression of the Church's deep sorrow and true remorse for what occurred. I continue to ask for forgiveness before God on behalf of the Church. To do more, the Archdiocese has established a Community Advisory Board with advocates, outside experts and abuse survivors to gain their wisdom and counsel as we provide ongoing support.

While the Archdiocese has done a lot, we can and should do more, and that includes cooperating with the Attorney General in any proper inquiry he might undertake. We will once again voluntarily provide access to documents and information on any living individual against whom a new allegation is made.

This is already our practice and, if there are any new prosecutable crimes, the Church will offer its assistance.

Many of you may recall that during our bankruptcy proceeding, 99 percent of the abuse claims went back 30 years or more, and only one claim was from later than the year 2000. This reinforces the historical nature of these crimes and indicates that education and prevention efforts are effective. During those proceedings, Federal Bankruptcy Court Judge Susan V. Kelley reviewed all the claims and stated that “no public safety concern is present.” Judge Kelly also confirmed the claims were old and against known abusers.

In addition to the review by Judge Kelley, Archdiocesan files have been reviewed multiple times over the past 30 years. First by a retired Milwaukee County Circuit Court Judge; then by civil authorities, including the Milwaukee County District Attorney; and also by an outside firm of former FBI agents; to make sure no allegations had gone uncovered -- which brings us back to the Attorney General’s press conference on the Capitol steps.

There is significant doubt that the Attorney General has the legal authority to conduct such an investigation. We have legitimate concerns that his inquiry is directly targeting only the Catholic Church. We have accepted our past history and worked so vigilantly to correct how things are handled, but it’s the Church is continually targeted. Just last month a Fox Valley public school teacher was charged with three tragic sex crimes involving children, and school officials apparently knew about inappropriate touching allegations five years ago, yet no disciplinary action was taken. Rather than rehashing old files from 40, 50 and 60 years ago, it seems like the Church could be a model for others to follow and the Attorney General could be investigating ongoing crimes from today, not from decades past.

We know mistakes were made in how some previous cases were handled, but today’s Church is now a model for how this issue is addressed. The Archdiocese of Milwaukee must simply and humbly, with regret, sorrow, contrition and resolve, continue to do our best to ensure to the best of our ability that nothing like this can ever happen again. We are firm in that resolve, and we demonstrate that commitment through the actions we have taken. No institution in the country has done more to combat the societal issue of sexual abuse of minors in the past 20 years than the Catholic Church.

That is a record we, as Catholics, can be and should be proud of. But we must remain vigilant in these advances, remembering foremost our care and concern and fervent prayer for those who have been harmed as we live out Jesus’ command to LOVE ONE ANOTHER.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Reverend Jerome E. ListECKi  
Archbishop of Milwaukee