

Letter to Priests and the Faithful of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston

Wednesday, June 5, 2019

To the Priests and Lay Faithful of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston,

As you know, last September, upon the Holy Father's acceptance of the resignation of former Wheeling-Charleston Bishop Michael J. Bransfield, I was appointed by the Holy See to serve as Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese and assigned to commission a preliminary investigation into allegations of sexual harassment of adults and financial improprieties committed by the former bishop. In March, at the time of the investigation's conclusion, I reported to you that I appointed five lay investigators - both Catholic and non-Catholic alike - of with professional competency in civil law, finance, human resources, and canon law, to conduct the investigation. Their work occurred over a five-month period and included interviews with dozens of individuals who had worked closely with the former bishop and interacted with him in a variety of ways, and whose knowledge and perspective would inform the findings. As I shared with you two months ago, I submitted the preliminary investigation to the Holy See for final judgment and suspended Bishop Bransfield's priestly and episcopal faculties within the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston and the Archdiocese of Baltimore, as was my prerogative to do so as the Metropolitan Archbishop and as the Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston.

Since last communicating with you about this troubling matter, I have sought to address the findings of the investigation and to continue to be pastorally present to the faithful of the Diocese as often as has been possible. In the spirit of transparency and based on my many conversations during various visits to the Diocese these past months, it is clear to me that more must be said about the report's findings and about the steps being taken to address them.

Regarding allegations of sexual harassment of adults by Bishop Bransfield, the investigative team determined that the accounts of those who accused Bishop

Bransfield of sexual harassment are credible. The team uncovered a consistent pattern of sexual innuendo, and overt suggestive comments and actions toward those over whom the former bishop exercised authority. The investigation found no conclusive evidence of sexual misconduct with minors by the former bishop during its investigation. It should be noted that due to privacy concerns and at the request of those who alleged harassment by Bishop Bransfield, the alleged victims and their personal accounts, which for them are a source of deeply-felt pain and humiliation, will not be disclosed by the Diocese.

Without a doubt, the alleged victims of former Bishop Bransfield's sexual harassment must be our first and constant concern. Thus, the Diocese has committed to providing counseling to them and to all priests and lay personnel at the Chancery. I have asked that a permanent program be developed and advertised to seminarians and priests that such services

are available. For known victims, the Diocese will commit to reimbursing the costs for mental health assistance for a provider of their choosing. Further, I have mandated that a third-party reporting system for any allegation against a bishop of the Diocese be implemented. This is in process and will soon be launched, allowing also for anonymous complaints to be made. Modeled after a program I instituted in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, the system uses a third-party vendor to receive and direct such reports to members of the lay-led Independent Review Board for reporting of any financial impropriety, sexual abuse or harassment to the appropriate civil and Church authorities.

Among the financial improprieties cited, the investigative report determined that during his tenure as Bishop of Wheeling-Charleston, Bishop Bransfield engaged in a pattern of excessive and inappropriate spending. The investigation found that Bishop Bransfield initiated and completed extensive and expensive renovations to his private residences in both Wheeling and Charleston, as well as his intended retirement residence, the construction of which was halted at my request at the time of my appointment as Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese. The investigation further found that Bishop Bransfield misused Church funds for personal benefit on such things as personal travel, dining, liquor, gifts and luxury items.

As we seek to understand how such behavior was able to occur over the course of Bishop Bransfield's 13-year-long tenure, it is evident from those who spoke with investigators that the Bishop's management style and personality undermined the effectiveness of diocesan policies, controls and oversight procedures. In some cases, it is apparent that the judgment of diocesan personnel was impacted by the culture of fear of retaliation and retribution that the former bishop fostered.

I have been in close collaboration with the leadership of the Diocese, including members of the Diocesan Finance Council, to identify how best to prevent such behaviors from occurring in the future. Clearly, despite proper checks and balances, diocesan policies and oversight procedures were subverted and we are determined to prevent this type of lapse from occurring in the future.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I feel it necessary to acknowledge that I was periodically a recipient of financial gifts in varying amounts by Bishop Bransfield for various occasions over the years, including my installation as Archbishop of Baltimore in 2012 and annually at Christmas. These gifts totaled \$7,500. In light of what I have come to learn of Bishop Bransfield's handling of diocesan finances, I have returned the full amount to the Diocese and have asked that it be donated to Catholic Charities.

Finally, I have made the determination in my role as Apostolic Administrator to immediately list for sale the Wheeling-Charleston bishop's residence. Built between 1908 and 1910, and located in the Parkview/Elm Grove section of Wheeling, the home originally belonged to William E. Weiss, a founder of Sterling Drug Co., formerly one of the largest patent drug firms in the United States. The home, replete with many original furnishings, was purchased from Linsly Institute in 1963 for \$63,000.00 by the late Bishop Joseph H. Hodges and has served since that time as the residence of four bishops of Wheeling-Charleston. It will serve this purpose no longer.

I am deeply pained by and sorry for the harm that the former bishop caused to those he was charged with shepherding in a spirit of Christ-like humility, service and pastoral care and charity. There is no excuse, nor adequate explanation, that will satisfy the troubling question of

how his behavior was allowed to continue for as long as it did without the accountability that we must require of those who have been entrusted with so much – both spiritual and material – as bishops and pastors. This is a critical issue our Church is presently committed to addressing once and for all, guided by the leadership of Pope Francis and his recent Motu Proprio. We are committed to bringing about the healing that the good people of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston require and can only pray for and work relentlessly to regain their renewed trust and confidence.

Faithfully in Christ,

Most Reverend William E. Lori

Apostolic Administrator, Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston

Archbishop of Baltimore