



Baltimore archbishop outlines path toward reform and renewal in the Catholic Church

By William E. Lori
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As is customary this time of year, Baltimore is again hosting the nation's Catholic bishops, who are convening here in America's first Roman Catholic diocese for extensive discussions about the relevance and impact of Catholic faith in American society. This year in particular, because of the severe crisis confronting the church, the agenda, deliberations and outcomes of our meeting are rightly under intense scrutiny.

The widely reported instances of child sexual abuse by Catholic clergy, the sexual harassment of adults and subsequent cover-up by far too many bishops are nothing short of horrific. These were crimes committed by men who presented themselves as God's representatives. Instead, they betrayed the trust of the innocent and their calling. The systematic concealment by church authorities and attempts to silence victims in the effort to spare the church liability and scandal was not only misguided but fundamentally and morally wrong. The cumulative fallout has led to a profound crisis of faith and identity among Catholics around the world.

The path to restoring trust and the credibility of church leaders is still uncertain but will unquestionably be long and difficult. The extensive listening sessions that I conducted with parishioners across the archdiocese made this abundantly clear. Essential to the process of healing is complete transparency, while also making clear the steps that have and will be taken to prevent such things from happening again.

Since 2002, when the issue of child sex abuse by Catholic clergy initially came to the forefront, the Archdiocese of Baltimore became one of the first dioceses in the world to publicly disclose the names of all credibly accused priests, dating back to the 1940s. In the 16 years since, the archdiocese has publicly disclosed the names of credibly accused priests whenever new allegations have become known. Moreover, it is the policy of the Archdiocese of Baltimore that any allegation of abuse be promptly reported to civil authorities, including Maryland's attorney general. Recently, it was announced that the Office of the Attorney General for the state of Maryland is conducting an investigation into the past and current practices of the archdiocese in dealing with instances of abuse. We have committed our full cooperation to this review.

Now, for the matter of accountability. There is zero tolerance for anyone in the employment of the Archdiocese of Baltimore — lay or clergy — who is credibly accused of sexual abuse. Anyone who is credibly accused is permanently removed from ministry and employment. Each allegation is also brought before an independent review board that is responsible for reviewing the archdiocese's handling of every allegation against any person who ministers on behalf of the church, including bishops. The board, comprised mostly of lay men and women with professional credentials in the fields of canon law, human resources, child protection and civil law, is empowered to oversee the archdiocese's enforcement of child protection policies.

Because the role and influence of the laity must be expanded, I have also announced the creation of a new Archdiocesan Pastoral Council to foster greater lay involvement in the pastoral and administrative life of the Archdiocese.

During the bishops' conference this week, we will take up the creation of a national third-party reporting system that will receive confidential complaints of sexual abuse of minors by a bishop, as well as any allegation of sexual harassment or sexual misconduct by bishops toward adults. Also being created

is a “Code of Conduct for Bishops” that will define clear and monitored policies for restrictions imposed on bishops removed or those who have resigned due to allegations of abuse or harassment.

Among the many factors that have contributed to this crisis is a deep-seated culture of clericalism, which fostered unhealthy notions of entitlement and exclusivity, as well as the distorted view that the priestly state puts those who abused minors, as well as those who protected them, beyond reach of civil law and authority. Sadly, some bishops were concerned more with avoiding legal, financial and reputational liability than they were with the emotional, mental, physical and spiritual well-being of those they were in a position to protect.

Gnawing questions persist about how such repulsive things could have been done to children and vulnerable individuals for so long and on such a scale by the priests, pastors and bishops in whom they placed their unconditional trust. How, many rightly ask, could church leaders not have seen these deeds for what they were — criminal acts to be prosecuted to the full extent of the law?

The simple answer is that for far too long there was an inadequate screening and formation process for those training to become a priest that failed to keep pace with progressive norms. The deeply flawed notion among church authorities that “personal and moral failings” (a.k.a. sexual disorders that led to child sexual abuse) could somehow be remedied with psychological and spiritual counseling led to the recycling of unfit individuals who inevitably went on to abuse again. Drastic changes have been implemented over the past two decades in the way the church recruits future priests and in the training and formation of seminarians. The archdiocese employs a rigorous screening process that utilizes a series of examinations, background checks and intense clinical and psycho-social interviews by a team of psychologists. Each seminarian is required to participate in four to six parish assignments prior to ordination, during which additional formal evaluation is conducted by both

superiors and lay members of the church. Ongoing spiritual counseling and assessment is also required. We are committed to ensuring that all who are in training for a lifetime of ministry are mature and healthy in mind and spirit.

Without question, the needs and care of victims must be our constant concern. The archdiocese remains committed to its longstanding practice of extending professional counseling without regard to the amount of time or cost required for healing. In some cases, when victims wish to be in control of their own healing, we offer mediated financial settlements decided upon by a retired non-Catholic judge. Although there are no statutes of limitations in Maryland for the criminal prosecution of felonies such as sexual abuse, the archdiocese supported legislation that became law in 2017 that extended the age by which victims of child sexual abuse are able to file a civil suit for monetary award against both public and private institutions operating in the state.

Many whose Catholic faith has been a life-long source of comfort, courage and cultural identity, are understandably conflicted. Despite their profound disappointment and moral indignation, they know of the enormous good that authentic faith and witness accomplishes day in and day out in carrying out the church's broad ministries to provide food for the hungry, shelter to the homeless, health care and treatment to those in the grip of addiction, job training and outplacement services, transitional housing for women and their children escaping abusive relationships, low income housing for seniors, education to more than 30,000 children in our more than 70 primary and secondary schools, healing to the sick and comfort to the dying. These acts of true Christian love — of selfless concern and care for others — defines what it means to be Catholic and to bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in our day and time.

We cannot allow the shame of the devastating failings we now confront to cause us to pause or in any way delay the essential work of the church —

sharing God's love, forgiveness and healing as we work also to promote common understanding, acceptance and mutual respect in a troubled world. In this, our sacred calling and active mission, we have the possibility to reassert a compelling Catholic identity — one that is worthy of the trust of those we serve and the admiration of society and people of every walk of life and faith.

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