



DIOCESE OF GRAND RAPIDS

Office of the Bishop

November 21, 2018

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Last week I attended the fall General Assembly of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in Baltimore. I want to begin by thanking you for the prayers and sacrifices you offered for me and the bishops who participated in this meeting. I felt strengthened by their effect and believe my brother bishops felt the same way.

We bishops were prepared to discuss and vote upon several measures that would begin to address the crisis in the Church regarding clergy sexual abuse and the cover-up of this abuse by bishops.

On Monday, before the meeting was called to order, there was a special announcement from USCCB President Cardinal Daniel DiNardo. He announced that Cardinal Marc Ouellet, prefect of the congregation of bishops, had sent him a letter instructing the bishops to delay voting on any matters related to the abuse crisis until after the February meeting of the presidents of all the episcopal conferences around the world had taken place. Pope Francis called for this meeting to assess the abuse problem from a global perspective and issue helpful conclusions.

I was stunned at this announcement. I, like all the other bishops, hadn't seen it coming, especially as it did just hours before the meeting was to begin. I turned to the bishop next to me and said, "What are we supposed to do for the next three days?" Providentially, the opening day of the meeting had been set aside for a day of prayer. Bishops, as a body, spent time before the Blessed Sacrament and celebrated the sacrament of penance. We also heard from two survivors of clergy sexual abuse who gave moving testimony and witnessed to the power of God's healing grace in their own lives. The day of prayer ended with Mass with Archbishop Bernard Hebda of the Saint Paul and Minneapolis Archdiocese giving an insightful and challenging homily.

For myself, this day of prayer was a great gift and blessing. It prepared me to participate in the next few days with a renewed sense of hope that our time together would ultimately contribute to the unfolding of God's purposes for our Church here and even throughout the world.

Here are three matters that the bishops discussed but did not vote upon:

1. The establishment of a special commission for review of complaints against bishops for violations of the standards of accountability for bishops. Such standards would include the sexual abuse of a minor, sexual harassment of or misconduct with an adult, and mishandling reports of the above actions. This commission, composed primarily of laypersons, would begin a preliminary investigation of allegations received by a third-



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party reporting system. The special commission would send its report to the apostolic nuncio, who would forward it to the appropriate congregation in the Vatican. It belongs to the pope alone to handle penal cases involving bishops.

2. The establishment of standards of accountability for bishops, as mentioned above.
3. The establishment of a third-party reporting mechanism for violations of the standards of accountability for bishops, as mentioned above. The system would include a toll-free phone number as well as a link for online reporting, both of which could be posted on any diocesan website.

What emerged from the discussion of these proposals was that the bishops are committed to making easier the reporting of abuse or misconduct by bishops. They are also committed to find a way of holding bishops accountable for personal misconduct as well as abuse of their office. This way of accountability would involve laypersons significantly. Very importantly, the bishops continue to call for a full investigation of the career of Archbishop Theodore McCarrick, and how he was promoted repeatedly in the face of the allegations that have now come to light. The Holy See announced in early October that it was beginning an investigation of Archbishop McCarrick and a report would be released in due time. We look forward to receiving the results of this investigation and ensuring that justice is served in this deeply troubling matter.

While the measures outlined above will help in making our Church safer and our bishops rightly accountable for their leadership, we must never lose sight of those who have experienced the trauma of clergy sexual abuse. Even though the perpetrators of this abuse may have died, their survivors remain in our midst. I apologize to all who have suffered from these evil crimes. I promise my prayers, support, and a willingness to listen to you.

It now appears to me that little will be implemented in the American Church until the bishops' next general assembly in June. The Holy See has determined that the solution to the sexual abuse problem must arise from a process that engages the worldwide Church. Let us pray for our Holy Father, Pope Francis, that through our prayers and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, he may lead us down the road to holiness which results in new and lasting reform in the Church we love.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Reverend David J. Walkowiak
Bishop of Grand Rapids