

# My pledge to restore trust

Archbishop [John C. Nienstedt](#) | October 24, 2013

It was Dec. 13, 2007. I remember it well. I had just returned from a meeting of the college of consultors of the New Ulm Diocese, having presided over the selection of a new apostolic administrator to take my place as bishop. The phone rang and my brother said, "Dad is dead."

I pulled the car over to absorb those words. Six weeks later I stood at my mother's hospital bed and watched her die. It was an extremely painful time in my life, losing both parents within such a short period. My parents had been very close to me. They had a huge influence on who I am. I could not have asked for better parents.

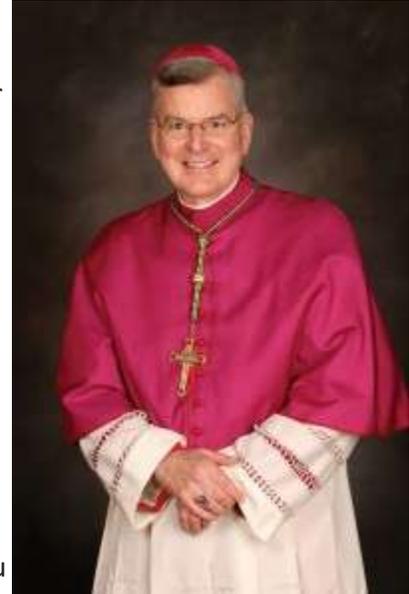
I recall those moments now, because the pain and sorrow I felt then reflects that which I have heard from so many of you in your own suffering and disillusionment these past few weeks. I want you to know that I have been praying for all of you. I am experiencing that pain, too. The media have been filled with all kinds of accusations and unanswered questions. There is cause here for sadness, confusion and anger.

After almost a month, I have come to understand more clearly what has happened to bring us to this point. I am grateful to my leadership team, which has helped me process this understanding. Practically all of my senior leadership team is new, with an average tenure of less than a year. We have been searching for answers. And while there is more to do, we have arrived at a better picture of the truth.

The first thing that must be acknowledged is that over the last decade some serious mistakes have been made. We have indeed created many policies, procedures and practices designed to prevent and address clergy sexual misconduct. The new independent Task Force will review all of this and hopefully tell us what we can do better. I am committed to implementing those recommendations.

But there are some additional aspects here that are clearer to me now. There is reason to question whether or not the policies and procedures were uniformly followed. There is also a question as to the prudence of the judgments that have been made.

Since 2002, when the national Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People was adopted and sweeping changes were made in every Catholic diocese here in the United States, we all hoped and believed that the horror of sexual abuse of minors by clergy was behind us. Yet, the painful reality is that abuse did not stop in 2002. This is unacceptable. As the head of this local Church, I know that the ultimate responsibility here is mine. My heart is heavy with the agony that these errors have caused.



To those who have been hurt, to the victims of clergy abuse and their family members, I can only tell you how sorry I am. I realize how damaging such actions are in violating the care of their human dignity.

The sexual abuse of a minor or vulnerable adult is reprehensible, morally repugnant and goes against Christ's teachings to promote goodness, life and light. This is not who we are as the Catholic Church. Abuse is a violation of both the love of God and the love of neighbor.

Sexual abuse of anyone is absolutely heinous, and it must be opposed with every fiber of our being. And when it is perpetrated by a member of the clergy, it is an egregious betrayal of a sacred trust. These crimes, these sins, are a failure to be stewards of our pastoral care of God's people.

And so, with genuine sorrow, I apologize to all those who have been victimized, whether on my watch or not.

Can we do better? I believe we can. There are some things that I commit to do right now.

First, I start with myself as archbishop. No priest, including me, should ever forget that we are ordained to minister to a living people, redeemed by the blood of Jesus. No member of any parish or school community should have to worry about the safety of the very environment in which we seek to impart and live out the Gospel message of Christ. As the head of this local Church, I recommit today never knowingly to assign a clergy member to a parish or school if I have concerns that he will do harm to the community. I promise to ensure that the most rigorous analysis possible is completed before making such assignments now and in the future.

Second, my entire team and I have recommitted ourselves to following a set of core principles in all that we do. I have been very impressed by the good work of Auxiliary Bishop Charles Scicluna of Malta who, for the last decade, was charged with the prosecution of clergy sexual misconduct on behalf of the Holy See.

Among the principles he has suggested should guide the global Church today, I have found the following to be of particular import and urgent relevance for us.

First and foremost, the well-being of every child or vulnerable adult must be our paramount concern; it must be what animates our every decision and action.

We must also empower the community, particularly children and parents, by educating them about the warning signs of abuse, the inherent dignity of the human person, and how children can protect themselves from unjust intrusions of others. We must help them to be able to verbalize and disclose abuse, especially when it involves a member of the clergy or some other abuse of sacred trust.

Further, we must be open to research and development, gaining insight from psychology, sociology and forensic sciences. We must learn from what has gone wrong in the past and avoid any repeat of that in the future.

We must also be committed to honesty and transparency. This must be the result of our own self-examination, inner purification and spiritual renewal. Parishioners rightly expect their clergy to be men of God and to be holy by pursuing personal conversion daily.

And, of course, we must cooperate with civil authorities. We are citizens of our community, too, and our very calling as Christian disciples impels us to always seek the common good of society.

Jesus taught that those who caused the little ones to trip and fall would not escape the demands of retribution (Matthew 18:6). Sexual misconduct by Catholic clergy creates the worst type of scandal: It calls into question our credibility as agents of God's grace.

Finally, having seen so many reports in the media and read the letters and emails of so many Catholic faithful as well as the general public, I am aware that there is real fear that some priests in ministry today constitute a danger to children. I could never knowingly allow such a situation.

In order to demonstrate this fact, I have ordered a review of all clergy files by an outside firm. We need to ascertain the facts, and this will lead us to prudent and ongoing disclosure.

I stand before God and in the memory of my beloved parents to pledge that I will do all in my power to restore trust here in this local Church.

As followers of Christ, we seek first God's kingdom, directing our every thought and action by our deep faith in Jesus Christ. Mercy, compassion, healing and justice are the tools by which we witness to the truth of our faith. With such tools, I believe we will once again know "the peace of God which is beyond all understanding" (Philippians 4:7).

God bless you!