

Listening sessions: Responding to questions, part three

This is part three of Bishop David Ricken's responses to questions he received when he held listening sessions about the sexual abuse crisis in the church. You can find parts one and two in recent issues of The Compass or online at www.thecompassnews.org.

WHAT HAPPENS TO CLERGY WHO HAVE BEEN REMOVED? DOES THE DIOCESE STILL PROVIDE SUPPORT FOR THEM?

In part two of this series, I provided information about what happens when we receive an allegation of clergy sex abuse. Towards the end of that response, I mentioned that even in cases where clergy do not face civil or criminal penalties, they are still subject to penalties under canon law, which is the law of the church. In answering this question, I want to provide a bit more information about these penalties, also known as canonical penalties.



Bishop David Ricken

Any priest found guilty under canon law of sexually abusing a minor is barred from public ministry for life. There is a zero tolerance policy for sexual abuse of a minor, one case and that priest can no longer serve in public ministry. When this occurs, the priest receives one of two penalties: he is either assigned to a life of prayer and penance or he is dismissed from the clerical state.

Being assigned to a life of prayer and penance is the lesser of the two penalties, but it still carries significant consequences. These priests cannot publicly present themselves as priests, can have no interaction with young people, and are subject to regular monitoring by the Diocesan Victim Assistance coordinator. This includes drop-in monitoring. These men remain priests whose job is to pray and do penance. They receive a reduced salary from the diocese up until official retirement age. Then they are legally entitled to whatever retirement benefits they have accrued, but, once retired, no longer receive a salary from the diocese.

The more serious penalty is to dismiss a priest from the clerical state. When clergy are dismissed from the clerical state, they are no longer priests, which is why this is sometimes referred to as being "laicized." Laicized men no longer receive a salary from the diocese.

The penalty that the guilty party receives depends on the seriousness of their offense, just as would be the case in a civil court. Of course, all abuse of a minor is extremely serious, but some cases warrant greater consequences than others. Initial decisions for the penalty of "formal dismissal of the priesthood" are made locally, but ultimately that decision must be approved by the Holy See.

I want to reiterate that penalties within the church are independent of the penalties someone faces from the civil authorities. We support whatever penalties civil authorities determine are appropriate, but the priest is still subject to canonical penalties regardless of the civil and criminal penalties they face.

CAN CLERGY CONFESS A SIN OF ABUSE IN THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION AND RECEIVE ABSOLUTION AND AVOID TRANSPARENCY?

Clergy, like all Catholics, can and should confess serious sins in the sacrament of reconciliation. We have a loving and merciful God, who gave his life for us despite our sinfulness. God can forgive any sin including the terrible sin of sexual abuse of a minor.

While the priest who hears this confession can never reveal what he has heard in the confessional, any evidence of the sexual abuse of a minor received outside of the sacrament of reconciliation must be turned over to the civil authorities immediately.

In terms of pastoral practice, a priest hearing a confession from someone who has committed a serious crime such as abuse, whether the person confessing is a priest or a lay person, should tell the person confessing that he/she has a responsibility to confess the crime to the authorities. However, he cannot compel the person to do so and cannot reveal what has been shared in the sacrament.

HOW DO WE KNOW THAT CURRENT CLERGY ARE NOT ABUSING MINORS? HOW ARE SEMINARIANS BEING SCREENED?

As I said in last week's issue, because we take allegations of abuse seriously, there are currently no priests in ministry in the Diocese of Green Bay who are known to have abused minors.

Priests and seminarians are part of the family of the church. Families must hold each other accountable. For priests and seminarians, this means not only being accountable to their superiors, namely the bishop and the Vicar for Priests, but to all members of the Body of Christ, both priests and laity. So if you are aware of clergy who have or are abusing others, we want you to report the abuse to civil authorities and to the diocese. The only way we can address the problem is if it is known.

At the same time, we work hard to adequately screen any man who would like to join the seminary. The process begins with conversations to get to know the person better. We discuss his vocation story and family history to try to get a better picture of the prospective candidate. If, after consultation with me and others, we feel that this man has an authentic call to the priesthood in our diocese, we will begin the formal application process. Today, the application is 19 pages long and asks everything from the applicants' educational background to their work background to their physical health to their legal background to their spiritual journey.

Knowing that this alone is not exhaustive, seminarian candidates also complete a full psychological evaluation. They meet with an independent psychologist who thoroughly evaluates the mental health of the applicant and offers their opinion on whether or not this person would be a good candidate for seminary. In the midst of this process, we also contact their parish priest, as well as a diverse group of references. Applicants also undergo a mandatory background check.

Finally, we ensure that every applicant is trained through the VIRTUS

program, which is our safe environment training. The program identifies best practices to promote safe and appropriate interactions between adults and children within our diocese, and every seminarian must read and complete the monthly bulletins that VIRTUS writes and sends to all those trained. If all goes well, the candidate will be accepted as a seminarian and begin studies.

SO DO YOU FEEL THAT THIS IS A HOMOSEXUAL ISSUE? ARE HOMOSEXUALS ALLOWED TO BECOME PRIESTS? ARE HOMOSEXUALS ALLOWED TO BECOME SEMINARIANS?

First of all, I think it is important to point out the distinction between homosexuality and sexual abuse. Although a majority of the people abused have been male, it is not accurate to equate homosexuality with abuse of children. We must be careful not to seek simplistic answers to complex issues.

In terms of homosexuals being seminarians or priests, what we are really discussing here is a matter of lack of fidelity to the promise of celibacy. All priests of the diocese make a solemn promise of celibacy, that is a commitment to refrain from sexual activity, whether heterosexual or homosexual.

Those who experience same sex attraction have been and continue to be part of the Body of Christ, the church. Throughout the history of the church, there have been priests who have experienced homosexual attractions and who nevertheless remained true to celibate chastity and their promises and vows. At the same time, sadly there are a few priests who have sinfully lived a double life and engaged in violations of celibacy either heterosexually or homosexually. Those who have broken their solemn promises represent a minority within the clergy.

A man who has "deep-seated homosexual tendencies" is not admitted to the seminary or ordained because of the likely danger of violations of celibacy. However, a man who has experienced same sex attraction and has an established pattern of living chastely can be considered for admission to the seminary.

Making this determination is part of the discernment process for a seminarian and those of us within the diocese responsible for the seminarians, in particular the vocations director and me. While fully recognizing the difficult discernment that comes with this, we as a church have a duty and obligation to ensure anyone admitted for Holy Orders has reached a level of emotional maturity necessary to carry out his ministry in our parishes.

IS CELIBACY PART OF THE PROBLEM? WHAT ABOUT ALLOWING MARRIED PRIESTS?

I think we must be careful in assuming that celibacy is somehow a root cause of sexual abuse. There are married men who sexually abuse minors. Allowing priests to marry would not prevent the possibility of clergy sexual abuse of a minor. This is evidenced by the fact that there are instances of clergy sexual abuse of a minor in denominations and religious faiths that have a married clergy.

Mandatory celibacy for priests is an ancient discipline in the Western Church, with deep spiritual and ecclesial roots. There is no direct connection between celibacy for priests and sexual abuse of children. The practice of celibacy has resulted in many good and holy priests who, because of their commitment to making this sacrifice, have been more available to love and care for the people of God.

ARE SACRAMENTS INVALID IF PERFORMED BY A PRIEST WHO HAS ABUSED?

A sacrament received by a priest who has seriously sinned (such as in the case of sexually abusing a minor) is valid. Sacraments work because of God's grace working through the human instrument of a priest, and the priest's sinfulness cannot prevent God from working. The heresy of Donatism was rejected by the church 1,500 years ago, which taught that only perfect priests could confer the sacraments. The effectiveness and validity of the sacraments comes from God, not from humans. We should all be grateful for that.

In next week's issue, we will have part four of this series.

REPORTING SEXUAL ABUSE

If you know of an incident of sexual abuse of a person who is now under the age of 18 by a priest, deacon, employee or volunteer,

PLEASE IMMEDIATELY
CALL THE CIVIL AUTHORITIES
AND THEN THE DIOCESE.

If the person was abused as a minor but is now an adult, please contact:

Office of Safe Environment
Diocese of Green Bay
920-272-8174 or
1-877-270-8174 (toll free)

We always encourage you to report
the incident to civil authorities.
YOU MATTER TO US — THERE IS HOPE!

Diocese of
Green Bay

Listening sessions: Responding to questions, part four

This is part four of Bishop David Ricken's responses to questions he received when he held listening sessions about the sexual abuse crisis in the church. You can find parts one, two and three in recent issues of The Compass or online at www.thecompassnews.org.

WE ARE TIRED OF HEARING WORDS, WE WANT ACTION! WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO ABOUT THIS? WHAT WILL BE DIFFERENT SO THIS DOESN'T HAPPEN AGAIN?

I hear your frustration! I want to make sure this never happens again, too.

That's why in early September I outlined our action steps for accountability. This was my promise to the people of this diocese that we would take action to address this problem. We are making progress in this regard and I want to share some updates.



Bishop David Ricken

I promised that I would listen to you, both through planned listening sessions in the parishes, but also by reading your letters and correspondence. We held seven listening sessions in September and early October, and over the past four weeks in The Compass, I have done my best to address the questions and suggestions that have come forward, including this question.

■ We have opened our clergy files for review, not only by our Independent Review Board, but by an outside firm, Defenbaugh and Associates, Inc. The leader of this review has over 33 years of experience with the FBI. This review will be concluded in the coming weeks and we will follow up with a report on the findings of the review.

■ We continue to encourage people to come forward if they are aware of abuse that is occurring at the hands of clergy or other employees of the church. We regularly provide contact information for people who wish to report abuse. In particular, we shared this contact information at our listening sessions as well as in this Compass series the past few weeks.

■ I have asked leadership at Catholic Charities to invite experts to our diocese who can provide further training in trauma recovery to therapists, social workers, school counselors and pastoral care ministers. The purpose of this training is to continue to increase our community's understanding of this

very important issue and enhance our efforts in accompanying victims of sexual abuse in their journey towards healing.

While we are making progress on these action steps and doing our best to learn the new lessons from the current cases of sexual abuse in the news, we remain committed to the policies in place as a result of the passage of the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People in 2002. Key actions that directly resulted from the Charter include:

■ We are committed to full transparency with all allegations of clergy sexual abuse of a minor.

■ All first-person allegations of sexual abuse by any representative of the church are reported to the appropriate civil authorities.

■ We cooperate fully with civil authorities in any investigation they deem necessary.

■ We immediately remove from public ministry anyone in the church accused of sexual abuse of a minor, pending the results of any criminal and/or internal investigation.

■ The positions of Victim Assistance coordinator and Safe Environment coordinator were established and staffed to ensure resources would be available to receive allegations of sexual abuse of a minor by anyone in the church, and to accompany victims on their own path towards physical, emotional, and spiritual healing.

■ All clergy, lay employees and volunteers who work with children or individuals at risk must submit to an initial criminal background check; the background check is refreshed every four years.

■ All clergy, lay employees and volunteers who work with children or individuals at risk must attend Safe Environment Awareness education.

■ All children in our Catholic schools and faith formation programs receive age-appropriate Safe Environment Awareness education to enable them to better protect themselves. This training also teaches students how to share any concerns that they may have that someone may wish to abuse them.

■ We have an Independent Review Board consisting mainly of laypersons with professional experience in health care, counseling, law, and law enforcement. They provide me counsel and guidance concerning investigations of clergy abuse allegations and enforcing our sexual misconduct policies.

WHY IS THE EXTERNAL REVIEW ONLY LOOKING INTO PRIESTS/DEACONS? WHY NOT LAY MINISTERS? DOES THE DIOCESE HAVE ANY RECORD OF LAY MINISTERS BEING ACCUSED OF ABUSE?

"While we are making progress on these action steps and doing our best to learn the new lessons from the current cases of sexual abuse in the news, we remain committed to the policies in place as a result of the passage of the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People in 2002."

Bishop David Ricken

What prompted the outside review were the recent accounts of clergy sexual abuse that stemmed from the grand jury report from Pennsylvania's two year investigation. Since this report looked specifically at clergy, our review does likewise. We do not have plans at this time to review lay ministers.

Having said that, the question about abuse by lay ministers is a fair one, so I want to address it. There are currently no known lay ministers in the Diocese of Green Bay who have abused minors. As I mentioned with respect to clergy in part three last week, the only way we can address abuse is if we know about it. So if you are aware of lay ministers who have or are abusing others, we want you to report the abuse to civil authorities and to the diocese.

I can further assure you that we take allegations of abuse committed by a lay person just as seriously as we do allegations of abuse committed by clergy. Our policies are the same in both cases, which I have already outlined.

WHEN WILL WOMEN BE ALLOWED A ROLE IN LEADERSHIP IN THE CHURCH? IT'S TIME FOR WOMEN PRIESTS.

While women are already in many leadership roles in the church, it is not possible for them to be ordained as priests. The ordination of men as priests is deeply rooted in the example of Jesus who chose 12 men as his first apostles. In their role as priests, men fulfill the role of Christ as bridegroom in service to his bride, the church. Following the example of our Savior, the church has imitated Christ in only ordaining men as priests.

Yet women have a role in the leadership in the church. All Christians are called to holiness, to lovingly follow Jesus as his disciples, and to share the Good News of salvation with the world. Today, as the role of women has expanded in our society, so has their role expanded in the leadership of the church.

Dedicated and faithful women comprise the majority of members of parish and school staffs and also

fulfill many of the leadership roles at the diocesan offices. Women also serve critical roles on various boards and councils within the diocese, including our Diocesan Pastoral Council, Independent Review Board, and Catholic Foundation board, among many others. The experience, commitment, and wisdom that these women bring to our church has blessed the Diocese of Green Bay in countless ways.

Despite the greater presence of women in these leadership roles, I think we need to continue to identify ways to ensure that women's voices are never marginalized in the church. As long as some women feel ignored by church leaders, the Body of Christ will not be healthy. As your bishop, I am committed to ensuring that the voices of all the faithful are welcomed and affirmed.

I want to again thank you for the questions you have posed. I have done my best to answer them clearly and I hope my responses have been of some help to you. I have taken all your questions and suggestions to heart, and I will be sharing with my brother bishops what I have learned from you when we gather for our annual meetings next week. In addition, I will continue to provide updates to you on the steps we are taking to protect all people in the Diocese of Green Bay.

I continue to ask for your prayers, first and foremost, for all who have suffered as a result of clergy sex abuse. Please also pray for me, as I continue to discern how the Holy Spirit is calling me to promote healing for all people of the Diocese of Green Bay. I thank you for your prayers and will hold each of you in my prayers as well!

Part four is the last part of this series. However, there are additional questions that may be addressed in subsequent issues of The Compass. Some of these questions relate to issues that can only be addressed and responded to after the November meetings of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), which Bishop Ricken will attend, as well the completion of the external review.

REPORTING SEXUAL ABUSE

If you know of an incident of sexual abuse of a person who is now under the age of 18 by a priest, deacon, employee or volunteer,

**PLEASE IMMEDIATELY
CALL THE CIVIL AUTHORITIES
AND THEN THE DIOCESE.**

If the person was abused as a minor but is now an adult, please contact:
**Office of Safe Environment
Diocese of Green Bay
920-272-8174 or
1-877-270-8174 (toll free)**

We always encourage you to report the incident to civil authorities.

YOU MATTER TO US — THERE IS HOPE!



Diocese of
Green Bay