



August 22, 2018

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Words fail when attempting to respond to the horrific revelations of the last two weeks. The report by the grand jury in Pennsylvania on the criminal abuse of minors by priests and the way in which Church leaders, including bishops, sought to cover up these acts, rips open the wound with which we have dealt for decades. When coupled with the accounts about former Cardinal McCarrick, it is hard not to feel profound anger, disgust and frustration. How far this is from the Lord's command to his disciples to 'Tend [His] sheep'! These events undermine our ability to trust the Church.

Our first concern must always be for the victims of abuse. We must begin by holding them in prayer asking God to heal them. They have often been twice abused, first by a priest or religious, then again by a structure that failed to listen to them.

Our faith community also stands in need of healing, regaining trust that has been so damaged. Since 2002, the Society of Jesus has worked to rebuild trust, to prevent abuse and to respond quickly to any allegations of abuse against minors. The Central and Southern Province has adopted a zero-tolerance policy, complying fully and immediately with all legal requirements. The good of anyone who may have been abused is always our primary concern. All our policies and protocols regarding abuse cases are reviewed by external lay experts to ensure that they meet 'best-practice' standards, especially the Charter for the Protection of Young People.

No Jesuit who has been credibly accused is allowed to remain in ministry. A review board of lay and Jesuit members with experience in law, psychology, pediatrics, and social work advises me on all such matters. We have learned that in these cases, we need to make a prompt response.

Yet, we cannot simply focus on dealing with cases as they emerge. The Society of Jesus in the United States has a yearly program of professional education for all its members on creating a safe environment for minors and vulnerable people and ensuring that basic safeguards against abuse are in place. Candidates for admission are rigorously screened. Our aim is to have as strong a prevention program in place as possible.

Still more is needed, however. We join Cardinal DiNardo in asking for a rigorous examination of all matters relating to the accountability of bishops and other leaders in the Church, a process that must include lay professionals and must be fully transparent. Pastoral ministry requires trust, a gift that, for many, is now in tatters. We Jesuits too need to respond to the evils revealed in these last few weeks. The Province, its communities, and apostolates must follow Pope Francis' call for prayer and penance, prayer for healing of victims and of the Church, penance to cultivate in us a spirit of solidarity with the most vulnerable in our midst. I will soon propose concrete ways of acting upon the Holy Father's call.

Before I close, however, I ask anyone who has experienced abuse at the hands of a Jesuit to contact the Province. Please contact Ms. Carol Brescia, our Coordinator of Pastoral Support and Outreach at (314) 361-7765 or [UCSOutreach@jesuits.org](mailto:UCSOutreach@jesuits.org).

In this dark time, let us pray for the healing of those who have experienced abuse. Let us ask too that we in the Church may heed the Pope's call for contrition and even more so for a change of heart that places us always in solidarity with God's little ones.

Sincerely yours in the Lord,

Ronald A. Mercier, S.J.  
Provincial