



To the Priests, Deacons, Religious, and Laity of the Diocese of Knoxville,

He is Risen, Alleluia!

I wish to review with you the ongoing policy and procedures for how we in the Diocese of Knoxville protect our children from sexual abuse. I realize that the issue of sexual abuse has been in the news for the past several weeks, including stories about sexual-abuse allegations in Europe and in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. This brings forth old wounds and new concerns.

I know these allegations are very upsetting to victims of abuse, their families, and their friends. Indeed, they are disturbing, as well as a bit confusing, to many Catholics and the Christian faithful here in East Tennessee. The Church had procedures in the past to protect the well being of children; however, today we have more effective policies and procedures in place geared to protect children from abuse not only by clergy but also by teachers, youth ministers, volunteers, and others in authority in our children's lives. These policies include mandatory criminal background checks for anyone working with young people, along with safety training for children and those who work with children, all designed to minimize the possibility of any youth or young adult being abused. The diocese has in place a Safe Environment Program, a nationally recognized professional service to assist us in protecting our youth and young adults. We have a Victim Assistance coordinator in place as well, a trained professional available to care for needs as they arise. All our efforts to prevent the abuse of children are audited on a yearly basis by an independent, outside firm, The Gavin Group, to ensure that we are doing everything possible to protect our children. Our policies are available for public viewing on our Diocese of Knoxville website, dioknox.org.

These policies are regularly reviewed by an independent Diocesan Sexual Misconduct Review Board whose members include a physician, laypeople, clergy, and our Chancellor. Many of these board members are also parents and grandparents. In addition, any priest coming into the diocese must provide a letter of good standing from his superior stating that his record is clear and he has never been accused of sexual misconduct. Seminaries across the country have rigorous screening processes as well before any candidate is accepted to study for the priesthood.

The review board exists to receive complaints of sexual abuse, both recent and those from long ago, and its members interview both those claiming to have been abused and those who have been accused. At the first instance of a complaint, the family is urged to immediately notify civil authorities. If the complaint appears to be credible, the accused is immediately removed from ministry during an investigation.

Although the vast majority of our clergy serve faithfully, even one single case of sexual abuse of a child is one case too many. It is our hope and prayer that with the policies we have in place now, background checks, regular review board meetings, and an audit process, we will prevent future cases and be able to appropriately handle any cases brought to light. I appreciate the media's attention on this issue: we need to be transparent to maintain your trust. I am also grateful for the fact that Pope Benedict XVI has acted consistently and decisively in addressing this issue, both in the past as Cardinal Ratzinger and now as Our Holy Father.

Most Reverend Richard F. Stika
Bishop of Knoxville