

## BISHOP'S INTERVIEW

# Working together to end sexual abuse



Bishop Joe S. Vásquez is the fifth bishop of the Austin Diocese, which is home to more than 530,000 Catholics.

**Editor: Bishop, on Aug. 14, a Pennsylvania grand jury report that detailed claims of sexual abuse of more than 1,000 children over 70 years in six dioceses in the state was released. What was your response when you read that report?**

**Bishop Vásquez:** As I read the report, I felt as if someone had punched me in the stomach. I was sickened and outraged by the findings. The crimes attributed to former Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick and to the priests of those dioceses are unspeakable. Rightly so, many of our faithful are outraged by the findings in the report.

First of all, as the bishop I am sorry for any abuse that has occurred at the hands of a clergy member. When someone experiences sexual abuse, the wound is devastating.

Sexual abuse goes contrary to the vocation of the priesthood. As priests, we make promises before God and his church to live a celibate life and to protect the weakest and most vulnerable members of our society. As clergy, we know that we are blessed with the gift to serve the people of God, just as Christ did.

There is no doubt that the Pennsylvania report has undermined the credibility and confidence in us as bishops and the hierarchy of the church. People are wondering, for good reason, how they can trust church leaders when such horrific acts were allowed to take place in our church. The most difficult aspect of the report is reading about priests who repeatedly committed sexual abuse of minors after being removed from one parish and placed in another. We, including me and my brother bishops, must be held accountable and implement safeguards to prevent such terrible things from happening again. Those who perpetrate sexual abuse of a minor or any other type of criminal abuse must be immediately removed from ministry and held ac-

countable for their actions according to the law.

**Editor: Has the diocese dealt with any cases of child sexual abuse by clergy since the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People was adopted in 2002?**

**Bishop Vásquez:** I was installed as bishop of Austin in 2010. There have been three cases brought to our attention involving sexual abuse of a child after 2002. I was informed that in 2004, a deacon was convicted of indecent exposure with a child and received a 10-year probated sentence. The deacon was removed from ministry and shortly thereafter died. I was also informed that in 2005 a priest, who moved here from another diocese, was charged with groping a youth. He was removed from ministry. The case ended in a mistrial, and soon after the priest died. In 2011, a deacon entered a guilty plea in a case involving indecency with a child, a family member. The deacon was permanently removed from ministry.

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We received a few reports of inappropriate conduct by priests with children, such as inappropriate conversations or use of questionable language. These reports were investigated and acted upon.

Other than those, I am not aware of cases of sexual abuse of minors by clergy occurring after 2002.

We received, after 2002, reports of historic sexual abuse against minors by priests who were previously in this diocese; for example, abuse that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. Some of those reports were found to be credible. The priests involved in those cases are deceased or are no longer permitted to be in ministry.

**Editor: How can we be sure that pedophiles are not entering our seminaries?**

**Bishop Vásquez:** For the last several decades, our diocese, as well

as most of the other dioceses in our country, has been using the social sciences, namely psychology and psychiatry, to screen men for suitability to the priesthood. These tests help us assess our seminarians and help us determine that they are holy men of God who will fulfill their sacred vows of celibacy and who will protect the weakest and most vulnerable of our society. Of course, these tests are not perfect; however, these tests help us tremendously as we help men discern their call to the priesthood.

**Editor: Are you calling for any special Masses or novenas for the reparations of the sins of sexual abuse?**

**Bishop Vásquez:** Yes, in the next month, I will be asking the priests, deacons, religious and lay people of the Diocese of Austin to join together in a prayerful act of reparation. Please watch our website ([www.austindiocese.org](http://www.austindiocese.org)) and your parish bulletin for announcements. My intention is for all of us to come together to ask God

allegation comes forward.

As parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, catechists and so on, we must be alert and we must be aware of any signs of abuse of a minor. If we see something, we must say something! If we have cause to believe abuse by a clergy member or by any adult has occurred, we must immediately report the abuse to the civil authorities and then to the diocese in accordance with our Ethics and Integrity in Ministry policies.

Indeed, in this diocese we are blessed to have good and holy priests and deacons — men who love the church and who protect innocent lives on a daily basis. They have served for many years with fidelity, perseverance, commitment and joy. For them and their service, I am greatly indebted.

Our laity has always been so supportive of our clergy because they have witnessed their generosity in a multitude of ways. Our clergy celebrate the sacraments with love. They bring the love of Christ to those who are sick, they walk with those who have tragically lost a loved one, they counsel those who are seeking help, they work with ministries to bring God's love and mercy to those on the edges of our society.

As leaders of the church in order to rid the church of the scourge of abuse, we must rely more on the laity for their expertise in areas of investigation, law enforcement, psychology, and other relevant disciplines. Together lay people and members of our clergy can move forward past these difficult days to raise awareness of sexual abuse and to speak out if and when we have cause to believe it has occurred and to stop perpetrators from committing such crimes again.

**Editor: What is your prayer as we move forward?**

**Bishop Vásquez:** At this point of tremendous pain and suffering in our church, my prayer is that all victims of abuse may be consoled and wrapped in the loving arms of Christ. May we hold the leaders of our church, including myself, accountable for our actions and our errors. And may all of us, clergy, religious and laity, work together to end sexual abuse in the church and beyond.