

▲ Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio



Put Out Into the Deep

Protecting Our Children from Abuse

My dear brothers and sisters in the Lord,

October is child abuse prevention month and gives us the opportunity to raise awareness of how we can and how we are working together in our Church to keep children safe in their homes, schools, in our Church and our communities.

As part of our efforts to raise awareness on child abuse, in the Diocese of Brooklyn our Office of Victim Assistance Ministry and Office of Safe Environment Coordinators have been meeting with our religious education directors, catechetical leaders and principals to remind them, as mandated reporters, that they are required to report concerns of child abuse.

Each year throughout the United States, there are 2.9 million cases of child abuse that are reported. The youngest children are the ones that are the most vulnerable with over 25 percent of children being under the age of three, and over 45 percent being under the age of five.

Child abuse has lasting effects on the lives of children. Child abuse victims as young as three years of age have shown signs of depression and withdrawal symptoms. In a study on young adults who had experienced child abuse and neglect, nearly 80 percent suffered from depression, eating disorders, anxiety and suicide attempts.

In June of 2002, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) established The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People which is a comprehensive set of procedures for addressing allegations of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy and employees of the Church. The Charter called all dioceses in the United States to create a safe environment for children and young people, and to foster a means to provide healing and reconciliation to victims and survivors. In our Diocese here in Brooklyn and Queens, we have an Office of Safe Environment and Office of Victim Assistance Ministry to carry out these responsibilities.

The Safe Environment program is an extensive one. It requires background checks on all employees, volunteers at all levels for both the parishes and diocesan offices. Anyone who comes in contact with children is required to take Safe Environment training. Although there are no fool-proof methods of preventing child abuse, the Diocese of Brooklyn is taking every step possible, especially to make children aware of how they can protect themselves from any type of

abuse.

The scandal of child abuse affects not only our Church but many other institutions in our society, especially our public schools. It is interesting to note that we cannot do enough to make sure that all of the children in our society are protected.

The scandal, which came out in 2002, however, has taken a life of its own especially regarding how it was handled by the media. On May 18, 2011, the John Jay College of Criminal Justice issued a report titled, "The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950-2010." Commissioned by the National Review Board of the USCCB, the study was funded largely by the USCCB, and is a ground-breaking study on sexual abuse in any one particular organization. The results of this study are hardly ever referred to by the media. Yet, significant findings attest to the fact that although incidents of child abuse occurred, for the most part they were addressed, only in light of what was known in the last decades of the 20th Century. Today, in the 21st Century, we understand better the problems of child abuse and have taken tremendous efforts to eliminate circumstances when this can occur.

In the near future, a film will be released entitled "Spotlight." Its main focus is the work of the journalists of the Boston Globe in 2002 who uncovered victims that were sexually abused by priests as minors.

In 2002, our Church did experience a great crisis, when the sexual abuse of minors by clergy and how it was handled by those in charge, came out into the light. The suffering of all victims of abuse by clergy will always remain heavily in our hearts and minds. A great gratitude is owed to the survivors who courageously came forward and have made the Church a safer place by giving rise to programs and policies to protect our children.

This movie keeps this issue of abuse by clergy in the spotlight and allows us to compare where the Church was at that time and how far we have come. Nevertheless it does not mean that this scandal should be placed behind us, or that we should praise ourselves for the changes that have been made. We must always remain alert and ready to act in protection of our children. This movie also allows us to clarify the misconceptions and inaccuracies about the cause of child sexual abuse by clergy and employees of the

Church. In this film, we are led to believe that celibacy is a main factor in the abuse of minors by clergy. This is an inaccurate statement. Unfortunately, as statistics show, the horror of sexual abuse is not limited to or predominantly found in celibate clergy, but rather is found in all aspects of society.

We continue to ask for your prayers as we continue to work towards a safe environment in our Church, in our families and in our communities and the wisdom to create new initiatives towards this goal in protecting God's children.

In our Catholic Church, we repeatedly reaffirm our deep commitment to creating a safe environment within the Church for our children and our youth.

This year alone throughout Brooklyn and Queens, this commitment is shown in the 63,637 children educated on how to protect themselves.

As studies have shown, the best way to protect our children and our Church is for adults to learn red flag behaviors and to report their concerns. In the Diocese of Brooklyn in this past year, 6,500 adults were trained in our Virtus Program and submitted to background screenings.

Our diocese also has codes of conduct. adults must follow to create a safe environment along with submitting to background screenings. Presently in our Diocese we have 28,000 registered volunteers with only 90 people still in the process of completing Virtus training and their safe environment requirements.

Keeping children safe is everyone's responsibility.

The Catholic Church has worked hard to protect children. Much has changed in the past decade, but one should never become complacent. More always needs to be done. The Church will continue its efforts to put an end to the abuse of the most vulnerable.

The Catholic Church in Brooklyn and Queens has a continued and a deep commitment to creating a safe environment within the Church for children and youth. We truly have put out into the deep, using every means at our disposal to protect our children and create the environment which will protect them.

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