

# FROM YOUR DIOCESE

APRIL 2024

FROM BISHOP RICHARD G. HENNING

## THE RESPONSE TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Child sexual abuse poisons all segments of society - families, schools, churches, community organizations, and health and welfare institutions. The Centers for Disease Control estimates that 1 in 7 children in the United States experiences some form of childhood sexual abuse or neglect. That number is heartbreaking and cries out for a response.

The Catholic Church in the United States has experienced terrible revelations of sexual abuse by clergy and religious. The great majority of the allegations have been characterized as “historical” in that they concern sins committed decades ago. The pain of these sins was magnified when some Church leaders failed to respond properly to victim survivors and their families.

In my last column, I addressed the importance of the prevention of child sexual abuse, and I outlined some of the prevention efforts by the Diocese of Providence. Commitment to prevention is a critical element of the response to victim survivors, but it is not the whole of the story. Prevention might reassure

victim survivors that the children of today are safer, but it does not heal the very real and serious wounds of those who have already suffered.

Child sexual abuse is a betrayal of trust and innocence. In most cases, perpetrators “groom” their victims, establishing and then breaking trust. In a very sinister way, abusers often manipulate the child into feeling complicit in their abuse. When such betrayal of trust is combined with the failure of other adults to protect a child, the wounds inflicted are lifelong.

As a Church, we have an obligation to respond lovingly to those who suffer so unjustly these sins against their human dignity and well-being. This begins by stating unequivocally that they are victim survivors and that they bear no responsibility for what was done to them. That sense of guilt and shame is an ongoing effect of the evil deeds of the perpetrator.

In those instances when the perpetrator of sexual abuse was a priest or religious, the survivor’s relationship with God is deeply affected. The sense of betrayal and lost trust might apply to the Church or even God. Consider how painful a church setting or Catholic practices might be for a person who has suffered such evil deeds. The effects of clergy sexual abuse

also extend beyond the victim survivors to their family and loved ones.

I am sorry to say that it is often very difficult for clergy victims and their families to trust the Church. For those who are willing, the Diocese of Providence has and does provide, and will continue to provide, financial assistance for psychological support services. For those who wish it, the diocese also offers appropriate pastoral care.

Victim survivors deserve compassionate accompaniment. Over my years of ministry, I have had the opportunity to know and share faith with survivors. They have been a true blessing to me as a priest and as a disciple of the Lord. As I near the first anniversary of my ministry here in Providence, those faces and voices are before my heart. Some years ago, the Diocese of Providence held a Mass for Hope and Healing, a prayerful support offered by many dioceses. I would like to make such a Mass an annual event to pray with and for survivors, their families, and their parish communities. During National Child Abuse Prevention Month, I have also asked our pastors to include petitions for healing in the Prayers of the Faithful.

In all humility, I ask that we all incorporate the spiritual accompaniment of victim survivors into our own prayer

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practices. I hope that we can express to victim survivors of sexual abuse in the Church, or in any other setting, our reverence for their sacred dignity and our compassionate love for them. They are our brothers and sisters. We long for them to join us in the communion of the Church. We need their witness of resilient faith and healing.

## Would you join me now as you read this column by praying this prayer:

*“God of endless love, ever caring, ever strong, always present, always just: You gave your only Son to save us by the blood of his cross.*

*Gentle Jesus, shepherd of peace, join to your own suffering the pain of all who have been hurt in body, mind, and spirit by those who betrayed the trust placed in them.*

*Hear the cries of our brothers and sisters who have been gravely harmed, and the cries of those who love them. Soothe their restless hearts with hope, steady their shaken spirits with faith.*

*Grant them justice for their cause, enlightened by your truth.*

*Holy Spirit, comforter of hearts, heal your people’s wounds and transform brokenness into wholeness. Grant us the courage and wisdom, humility and grace, to act with justice.*

*Breathe wisdom into our prayers and labors.*

*We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen.”*



**MOST REVEREND RICHARD G. HENNING, S.T.D.**

Bishop of Providence

### WATCH THE VIDEO



During April, as we observe **Child Abuse Prevention Month**, Bishop Richard Henning uses his first year as Bishop to explore all the ways in which he and the Diocese of Providence uphold this sacred duty of ensuring the safety and well-being of children and young people across parishes, schools, and ministries throughout Rhode Island, in this new video.

Watch at [provd.io/bulletin](http://provd.io/bulletin) or scan the QR code below

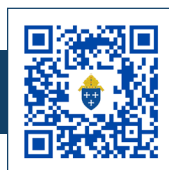
## REPORTING & ASSISTANCE

The Diocese of Providence urges anyone who has been the victim of sexual abuse, or with credible knowledge of such abuse, by any member of the Catholic Church, to report allegations to the R.I. State Police, local law enforcement, the R.I. Attorney General’s Office, and **Kevin O’Brien**, Director, Diocesan Office of Compliance, 401.941.0760, [kobrien@dpvd.org](mailto:kobrien@dpvd.org).

To seek assistance for victims or family members affected by such abuse, please contact **Michael Hansen**, Director, Diocesan Office of Outreach & Prevention, 401.946.0728, [mhansen@dpvd.org](mailto:mhansen@dpvd.org).

For more information on the abuse policy of the Diocese of Providence, please visit: [www.dioceseofprovidence.org/compliance](http://www.dioceseofprovidence.org/compliance).

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