

Open letter from the Honorable Michael J. Talbot, Chair of the Archdiocesan Review Board, on the processing of sexual abuse complaints in the Archdiocese of Detroit

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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With the hope of healing for those who have been abused by members of the clergy – and in response to questions from the faithful – the Department of Communications shares an open letter from the Honorable Michael J. Talbot, Chair of the Archdiocesan Review Board, on the processing of sexual abuse complaints in the Archdiocese of Detroit.

To report sexual abuse by clergy or church representatives, go to protect.aod.org.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Recent reporting on the scourge of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church provides a timely catalyst to review the practices and policies in the Archdiocese of Detroit. Questions and answers, such as: What happens here? How are complaints of the sexual abuse of minors by clergy processed in the Detroit archdiocese? And by whom? As chairman of the Archdiocesan Review Board, which considers all such complaints and then advises Archbishop of Detroit Allen Vigneron, I would like to share with you how we have handled cases here for many years. I also will describe our outreach efforts to the victims of clergy sexual abuse and our extensive and ongoing efforts to promote safe environments.

Prior to the June 2002 meeting of the U.S. Bishops in Dallas, when the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People was adopted, the Detroit archdiocese reconstituted its review board. (An earlier version of the review board was established in 1988, when the archdiocese became one of the first dioceses to implement a policy on the sexual abuse of minors by clergy.) I accepted the role of chairman of the independent board formed in 2002, and continue in that same role today. My current fellow members include a retired prosecutor, a psychologist, a health care executive, a former superintendent of Catholic schools and an archdiocesan pastor.

In the spring of 2002, the archdiocese also signed voluntary agreements with the prosecutors from all six counties within its boundaries to share case files of priests accused of sexual misconduct in previous years. In some cases, those files involved complaints of abuse that occurred in the 1940s and 1950s. Four criminal prosecutions resulted from the archdiocese sharing its files.

Importantly, this agreement with prosecutors continues to this day. Since 2002, every complaint that comes in, regardless of its source or the date of the alleged activity, is reported to civil authorities. No complaints are held back, pre-screened or disregarded. The archdiocese fully cooperates with law enforcement.

Similarly, complaints are considered by the Review Board. That process usually includes an

independent investigator whose findings are forwarded to the Review Board. We currently work with two investigators: a retired police detective and a retired prosecutor. If the Review Board finds a complaint credible, it sends notice to the archbishop, who will forward the case to the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), which reviews all cases involving the sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable adults by clergy. The archdiocese considers a complaint to be credible if it has a "semblance of truth," meaning it appears to be or could possibly be true.

No priest or deacon with a credible complaint against him is allowed to continue in active ministry during the time his case is under review by the Church or civil authorities. Those priests who are restricted and/or removed from ministry are monitored by a retired parole officer to ensure compliance with the strict limitations on their public ministry.

If an allegation against a priest or deacon is found to be credible, his name is posted on the archdiocesan website at protect.aod.org. He may also receive a permanent penalty of living a life of prayer and penance or dismissal from the clerical state, also called laicization. In either case, he may no longer represent himself as a priest or deacon, can no longer wear clerical attire and may not exercise any form of church ministry.

The archdiocese has publicly posted the names of restricted and/or removed priests and deacons for more than 15 years. Current practice also includes notifying the parishes in which the clergy in question served, as well as local media.

Complaints come to the Detroit archdiocese by verbal report via the 24/7 toll-free victim assistance line, 866-343-8055, or in writing to vac@aod.org. There are no deadlines or time limits on those who wish to make a complaint; it does not matter if the abuse occurred five, 15 or more than 50 years ago. Every effort is made by the Victim Assistance Coordinator – a credentialed social worker – to assist with healing and counseling for those who have been abused. If requested and helpful, the archbishop or his priest-delegate will meet with the victim.

We recognize that the best approach to addressing abuse is to prevent it from occurring in the first place. Since 2002, the archdiocese has implemented a number of safe environment programs, all designed to identify situations that could leave a child vulnerable to the methods of sexual offenders and to emphasize the critical steps that must be taken to prevent and report the sexual abuse of children and vulnerable adults.

The program for adults, called Protecting God's Children, is mandatory for all clergy, church representatives, employees and volunteers – all those who work with children and vulnerable adults. There are also similar, age-appropriate, personal safety programs for grade school, middle school, high school and religious education students. They go by such names as Circle of Grace, Called to Serve, Called to Protect and Think First and Stay Safe.

Since 2002, more than 101,000 adults have been trained through these programs. In addition, each year we provide training for the 29,000 students in our Catholic K-12 schools and the 39,000 in Religious Education.

The archdiocese also regularly educates church and school personnel about mandatory reporting. In Michigan, professionals required to report their suspicions of child abuse or neglect to state authorities include clergy, school teachers, counselors and social workers.

Our highest priority is those who have suffered from clergy abuse. We recognize the deep trauma from their experiences, and we understand it may take a long time before an individual is ready to come forward. No matter how long it has been, we are here to listen and try to be of assistance.

Each meeting of the Review Board begins with a prayer first used in 2011 by the Archbishop of Dublin. I would like to conclude by sharing that prayer with you:

*Lord,
We are so sorry
for what some of us did to your children:
treated them so cruelly,
especially in their hour of need.
We have left them with a lifelong suffering.
This was not your plan for them or us.
Please help us to help them.
Guide us, Lord.
Amen.*

Respectfully,
Judge Michael J. Talbot (Ret.)
Chair, Archdiocesan Review Board