



# DIOCESE *of* LACROSSE

## OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

16 June 2021

Year of St. Joseph

My dear brother priests, deacons and faithful of the Diocese of La Crosse:

May the Lord give you peace.

I write you today regarding the Attorney General's request for voluntary release of information concerning his announced review of old reports of clergy and faith leader abuse within the Catholic Church. Since my appointment as the tenth Bishop of La Crosse, clergy abuse has been one of the primary concerns of my Episcopal ministry. The deep scars and pain with which people live as survivors of these heinous crimes touches me to the depth of my heart. I apologize again for the pain caused by members of the Church concerning sexual abuse, particularly of minors, for we cannot apologize enough for these past hurtful actions. To assist with the healing process, I have met and will continue to meet with survivors, offering assistance with counseling and spiritual support.

I wish I could heal the scars of the past, but all I can do is walk with the injured as we all travel with God's grace into the future. As we move forward, we will continue to evaluate our response and try to improve. While there is always more work to accomplish, we have to be aware of some of the great strides we have taken in this area. Our Protect and Heal program has been in place for many years. Through its policies, procedures and training, our commitment to safety is demonstrated. Annually nearly 40,000 individuals from our Diocese have been trained to recognize potential abuse/abusers and to have heightened awareness of this societal scourge. Furthermore, periodic criminal background checks numbering more than 75,000 today are required for all bishops, priests, deacons, staff and volunteers working with children.

A few years ago, we conducted an external audit of 1,218 individual files dating back to 1868. The firm Defenbaugh & Associates, Inc., from Kaufman, Texas, composed of retired agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, reviewed the files and provided their analysis. As a result, all the names of diocesan priests with a substantiated allegation of sexual abuse of a minor were posted on our website in 2020. This list is updated when new information is received.

While the Diocese of La Crosse has done much, we can do more. As such, we will continue to cooperate with law enforcement in connection with allegations that are made against a living individual, which includes allegations made by the Diocese of La Crosse pursuant to Wisconsin's Mandatory Reporting Law. We will continue to turn over allegations received to the proper District Attorney, even when those allegations relate to decades-old conduct, and the Diocese will, in its own

right, also conduct investigations of the allegations. These practices are consistent with our commitment of openness and transparency.

The current breadth and depth of the investigation requested by the Attorney General goes way beyond these acts of cooperation currently in practice by the Diocese. There is significant doubt that the Attorney General has the legal authority to conduct such an investigation. We have legitimate concerns that his inquiry is directly targeting only the Catholic Church. We have accepted our past history and worked so vigilantly to correct how things are handled, but it's the Church that is continually targeted. We have responded to the Attorney General's request for information with our questions of legitimate concern and await his responses before we make a final decision on our ability to meet his requests.

The Diocese of La Crosse will continue to do our best to ensure that nothing like this can ever happen again. With firm resolve to improve our response to those scarred by this evil, we demonstrate our commitment through the actions we have taken. No institution in the country has done more to combat the societal issue of sexual abuse of minors in the past 20 years than the Catholic Church.

I encourage all victims to come forward as we offer our willingness and ability to assist in the healing process. I pledge my continued efforts to protect against future abuse. I promise that every future allegation will be addressed professionally and thoroughly.

May God continue to bless us all and provide healing for all of our brothers and sisters who have been affected by this tragedy in our lives of faith.

Very truly yours in the Hearts of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, I am,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ William Patrick Callahan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

+Bishop William Patrick Callahan  
Bishop of La Crosse