News



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The Diocese of Greensburg unveiled Aug. 9 a document about safeguards and procedures in place to protect children, as the state of Pennsylvania gets ready to release a grand jury report about past claims of sexual abuse of children involving hundreds of priests and other church workers at six of the state's eight dioceses.

In the document the diocese also apologizes to those it failed.

"Admittedly, there have been occasions where the church and the Diocese of Greensburg have faltered in their protection of children, young people and vulnerable adults, and for those, the Diocese of Greensburg apologizes to the survivors and their families and continually offers assistance to help them heal," the document says. "Survivors need our help, and we stand ready to assist them with counseling, spiritual guidance, love and our sincere apologies for any past failures

on the part of our diocese."

The document says the diocese "is not proud" of its past when it comes to protecting children but says it has done much to put in place safeguards to prevent abuse from happening. Those accused face investigation by the diocese and law enforcement authorities, the document said.

"Priests who have abused children have no place in our ministry. No one does," the diocese writes in its "2018 Progress Update on Protection of Children: Higher Standards of Today's Catholic Church."

In the document, officials promise transparency and openness, and outline procedures designed to prevent future abuse while acknowledging that "as a church and as a diocese, we know sexual predators will never go away."

It also directly addresses the imminent release of the grand jury report, which will detail some seven decades of claims of sexual abuse of children by Catholic clergy and a reported cover-up by officials in the dioceses of Harrisburg, Allentown, Scranton, Pittsburgh, Erie as well as Greensburg, according to the Pennsylvania's Office of the Attorney General.

When the grand jury releases its report to the public, the Greensburg document says, "we will release a list of clergy in our diocese with credible allegations against them on our website" on the same day. Some names will be familiar, and others will not, the diocese said.

Pennsylvania has until Aug. 14 to release the report. Some, like the Diocese of Harrisburg, have already made a list public of priests and other church workers accused of sexual abuse in the past, while saying that "this is a list of accusations; we did not make assessments of credibility or guilt in creating this list."

But most of the dioceses are taking actions such as Greensburg, waiting until the release of the report to disclose the names of those "credibly accused."

"We have always supported the release of the (report)," the document says. "We want those survivors to have the voice they deserve."

The document also addresses two relatively recent accusations involving priests in the diocese. The first one involves Fr. John Sweeney, who was suspended and placed on administrative leave in 2016 after authorities in Pennsylvania's Westmoreland

County told the diocese "a report of alleged sexual abuse of a child involving Sweeney dating back to the early 1990s was made to PA ChildLine," a state service where the Pennsylvania public can report suspected child abuse or general child well-being concerns.

Though the diocese had no documented prior allegations of sexual misconduct for Sweeney, he was removed from ministry. In late July, he pleaded guilty to charges of indecent assault on a minor under 14 years old and is awaiting sentencing.

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Another priest, Fr. James Clark, was removed from his duties as a parochial vicar and chaplain earlier this year after the diocese was told in late June of an allegation that "dated to events five decades ago, prior to his entrance into the seminary and ordination as a priest, while working as a janitor at the former St. James School in Apollo," the document says.

The diocese reported it immediately to law enforcement authorities and removed the priest from his pastoral duties.

"We are proud of our diocese's ongoing and continuing evolving response, our efforts to protect and our determination to help survivors heal," the document says. "We are a strong community of Christian believers who have accepted responsibility, and we have apologized for the long-ago actions of some clergy and laypeople in this diocese."

Though the diocese has done much to improve safeguards, officials say they recognize that "no organization is infallible."

"To reiterate, the Diocese of Greensburg is saddened by our past failures -- grievous failures -- and we are horrified by the conduct that we ourselves would have never condoned and committed by men who, in many cases, many of us never knew," it says. "But, we are also aware that our diocese has moved forward from this past and evolved in combating this evil, and we are proud of the work that we have undertaken over the last 30 years to establish a safe environment for our children and our youth in the Diocese of Greensburg.

"And we are thankful for our faithful, who remain devoted through trying times, including our good priests who serve us well during these times of ongoing public

scrutiny."