News

Mike Stechschulte

View Author Profile



Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

DETROIT — September 21, 2018

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Michigan's attorney general has opened an investigation into the handling of sexual abuse by clergy in all of Michigan's seven Catholic dioceses, as well as any attempts to cover up those claims dating back to the 1950s.

Attorney General Bill Schuette confirmed the investigation began in August in response to an inquiry by Grand Rapids-based WOOD-TV8 Sept. 21.

He said in a statement that his office has determined that a "full and complete investigation of what happened within the Catholic Church is required. This investigation is and will continue to be independent, thorough, transparent, and prompt. My department and this investigation will find out who knew what and when."

Michigan's seven dioceses include Detroit, Lansing, Grand Rapids, Saginaw, Kalamazoo, Gaylord and Marquette. In addition to diocesan clergy, Schuette's office said it will investigate claims of abuse by religious order priests who have served in Michigan.

The attorney general's office also established a telephone and email hotline for reporting abuse by clergy in Michigan.

The Archdiocese of Detroit responded by saying it welcomed news of the investigation, pledging to cooperate fully in bringing to light all claims and helping victims of abuse receive justice and healing.

"We have worked closely with authorities from all six counties within our archdiocese since 2002, when we shared past case files involving clergy misconduct and committed to turning over all new allegations regardless of when the alleged abuse occurred," a Sept. 21 statement from the archdiocese's communications department said. "The attorney general investigation is the next phase of our commitment to transparency and healing.

"We have full confidence in our safe environment policies put in place and carefully followed for more than 15 years. We remain committed to protecting everyone — especially children and vulnerable adults — and therefore look forward to working closely with officials to determine if there is more we can do to accomplish this goal."

Schuette's investigation makes Michigan the latest state to launch an official inquiry into Catholic dioceses' handling of abuse, following the Aug. 14 release of a grand jury report in Pennsylvania that uncovered claims against 300 priests and other church workers dating back more than 70 years in six dioceses in that state. Subsequent to the Pennsylvania report, investigations were also launched in New York, New Jersey and Nebraska.

Detroit Archbishop Allen Vigneron has been vocal in recent months about the need for accountability among priests, bishops and church leaders, speaking out about the need for healing, repentance and actions to ensure abuse is brought to light and to prevent predatory behavior from happening in the first place.

As secretary of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Vigneron is part of the Administrative Committee, which crafted the U.S. bishops' plan to establish an independent, third-party reporting system for claims of abuse by bishops, as well as policies to address restrictions on bishops who resign or are removed from ministry due to claims of sexual abuse.

The archbishop also initiated a full review of practices and policies dealing with abuse in the Archdiocese of Detroit and shepherded the rollout of a new website, protect.aod.org, to consolidate resources and reporting of abuse in the archdiocese.

The Archdiocese of Detroit lists by name all clergy with substantiated accusations of sexual abuse on its website and has conducted mandatory safe environment training with more than 100,000 adults and 68,000 children in Catholic schools and religious education programs since 2002.

On Sept. 9, the archbishop publicly apologized to victims of abuse in a homily at the Cathedral of the Most Blessed Sacrament, pledging to remain open to listening to victim-survivors and to take proactive actions to promote healing, transparency and trust.

In mid-September, the Diocese of Lansing announced it would invite an outside independent investigator to review its files related to clergy abuse and pledged to publish the names of all abuser priests.

Advertisement

The Lansing Diocese said it also welcomed news of the attorney general's investigation, saying it will continue to provide law enforcement everything necessary to assist the case.

"We are confident in our processes," said a Sept. 21 diocesan statement. "We know of no one active in ministry in our diocese who has abused a child. The last known event of abuse occurred prior to 2002. It is important that anyone committing these crimes is brought to justice. We continue to pray that Christ will bring healing to all victims and to his church."

Likewise, the Saginaw, Grand Rapids and Kalamazoo dioceses each released statements saying they would cooperate fully with the attorney general's office.

On Sept. 14, Kalamazoo Bishop Paul Bradley released "A Plan to Protect," which detailed further measures his diocese will take to protect vulnerable individuals and promote healing, including reviews of safe environment training programs, the creation of an independent lay body to advise on policies and procedures related to abuse and to require a code of conduct for clergy and lay leaders.

Bradley also pledged to hold listening sessions with lay Catholics throughout the diocese.

"We understand the need to be proactive in our work and in providing information and have recently launched a dedicated website to this issue: www.protect.diokzoo.org," the Kalamazoo diocese said in a statement Sept. 21.

The statement also said the diocese viewed potential findings from the attorney general's investigation as "beneficial in our shared desire to bring justice and healing to all victims of abuse and to implement safeguards that are successful in eradicating any occurrences of wrongdoing."