News

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A few days before the U.S. bishops met in Baltimore for their annual fall assembly Nov. 12-14, Bishop W. Shawn McKnight of Jefferson City released to the public the names of the 33 priests and religious brothers who have been credibly accused and/or removed from ministry in the diocese since its founding in 1956.

He also released the amount of money spent on settlements, legal fees and other costs associated with the abuse crisis, and he challenged his brother bishops to join him in applying renewed urgency, transparency and compassion to addressing the past abuse of minors by clergy and to preventing it from happening again.

"We must do much more than make new promises or rely only on more prayer and penance," he said in a Nov. 8 statement. "Resolute action that manifests a true, firm purpose of amendment by the U.S. hierarchy is necessary."

He said that preferential care must be extended to all survivors of sexual abuse by clergy.

"As your bishop, I pledge to put the care of victims, their loved ones and their communities first and foremost," he said.

He also renewed his plea for people who have been harmed by an agent of the church to come forward and tell their story.

"One of the goals and the purposes of revealing the names of credibly accused clergy and religious is the hope of finding other victims who have not come forward, for healing," he said. "That's my ultimate concern."

He pointed out that there have been no credible accusations of sexual abuse of a minor made against any clergy or religious now serving in the Diocese of Jefferson City.

"The definition of credible, which I apply and which I have asked our diocesan Review Board to apply, is whether based on the available information, an allegation of abuse is more likely true than not true," he said.

He also has informed the superiors of religious communities of priests in the diocese that effective Jan. 1, 2020, any religious community must commit to releasing the names of all their credibly accused members in order to continue serving in the diocese.

He said the church and its people, especially its leaders, must insist on creating a safe environment for children and other vulnerable people.

"Today, there can be no more secrets in our diocese," he told members of the media and the diocesan chancery staff at a news conference. "We can only be a holy people, a people who are better together, if we have confidence in our priests and if you trust me as your shepherd."

He reported that since July 1, 2003, $4.7 million has been spent on the fallout of abuse, with an estimated $1.5 million having been spent in the years prior to that.

That includes approximately $2.3 million for the care of survivors, and about $300,000 toward legal fees.

This money came from generous contributors to the diocese's community reconciliation fund, as well as proceeds from the sale of the former St. Thomas Seminary property in Hannibal, religious orders, and insurance.

Approximately $2.1 million was spent on the care of credibly accused and/or removed diocesan priests, with $1.8 million coming from the diocesan infirm priest fund and $300,000 from the Community Reconciliation Fund

Shortly after his installation as bishop Feb. 6, McKnight summoned a group of former FBI and law-enforcement officials to conduct an independent review of the personnel files of all the living priests, deacons and seminarians in the diocese.

They confirmed that no clergy member with any credible allegations of abuse is currently serving in the diocese, he said.

In August, he volunteered to cooperate fully with Missouri Attorney General Josh Hawley's investigation into the sexual abuse of minors by clergy, following the release of a grand jury report in Pennsylvania.

McKnight stated at that time that the attorney general and his staff would be looking only for evidence of criminal activity, while his own independent review also took into account noncriminal violations of the U.S. bishops' 2002 "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People."

"The church holds a much higher standard for those who serve its people holding a sacred trust," the bishop said in his Nov. 8 statement. "The solemn vows we take when we are ordained or enter religious life call us to higher standards of conduct."

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The charter provides consistent, verifiable norms for ensuring that all of the Church's environments are safe for children and others who are vulnerable.

McKnight said the diocese will continue to cooperate with Hawley, who has now been elected to the U.S. Senate, and whoever succeeds him as attorney general.

He also noted that since he urged victims of sexual abuse by clergy to come forward two months ago, 18 people have brought forth new allegations.

"All of them are historical," he said. "That is, the incidents of abuse are alleged to have occurred decades ago."

He said some of the investigations into those recent allegations are ongoing.

McKnight said he takes very seriously his responsibility as bishop of the people in central and northeastern Missouri.

"My vocation is a call to serve you, the people of God," he said. "I know the only way through this tragedy of ours must be taken with the active engagement of the entire church."

[Nies is editor of The Catholic Missourian, newspaper of the Diocese of Jefferson City.]