News



Pope Leo XIV greets bishops from around the world after offering a reflection during the Jubilee of Bishops in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican June 25, 2025. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



by Jonathan Ficara

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March 25, 2026

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Most Holy Father,

I write to you not as an adversary of the church, nor as one who has abandoned faith, but as a son who entrusted his life entirely to her structures and now bears the cost of that trust. I offer this letter as a personal witness, in the hope that it may contribute to the church's ongoing discernment about accountability, justice and the lived reality of those who seek help from within her hierarchy.

My experience raises a painful but unavoidable question: whether it is realistically possible to pursue justice from within ecclesial structures without first leaving them.

Having dedicated six years of my life in preparation for priestly service in the Diocese of Norwich, Connecticut, I looked forward to my ordination in 2014. Yet on the night before that ordination, I encountered a glimpse of how the church can fail to act justly, an experience that would ultimately derail my vocation.

On the night before my ordination, I was sexually harassed by a senior priest who held significant authority and influence within my diocese, following a period of escalating boundary violations. Several months later, I disclosed this verbally to my bishop, believing — based on my formation and understanding at the time — that bringing the matter directly to him was both sufficient and faithful. I was not aware of any other reporting body or review process, and I understood this disclosure as notice to the church.

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As far as I know, no investigation followed. No record was kept. No protective or corrective action was taken. Instead, I was advised to distance myself quietly, and the burden of managing the situation was placed upon me.

At the time, I interpreted this response as prudence or discretion. Only later did I understand that it had functioned as strategic inaction.

For years, I remained in ministry, carrying unresolved injury while continuing to serve the church in good faith. During that time, I lived with confusion, strain and growing psychological distress that I could not yet name. I understood, incorrectly it turned out, that my disclosure had been handled appropriately, even though no outcome or process was ever shared with me.



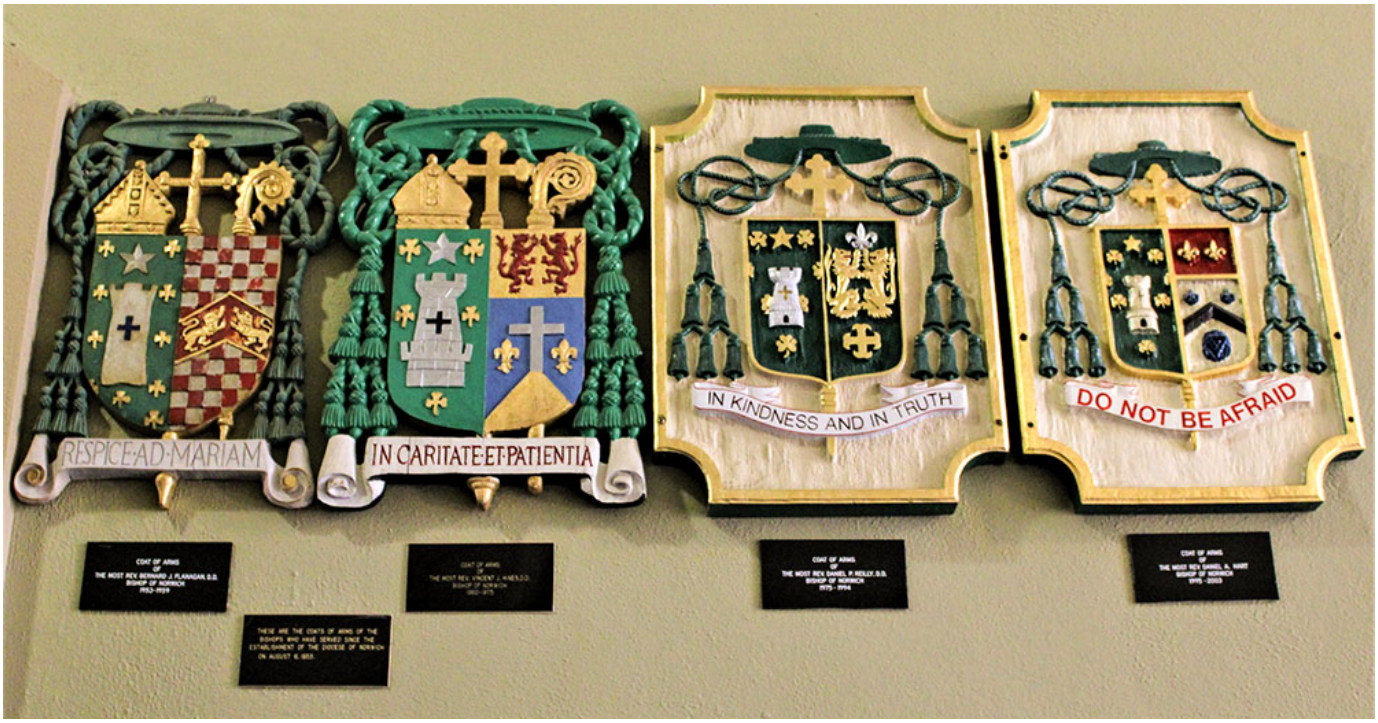
Fr. Jonathan Ficara holds his niece, Jenna, following her baptism in 2017. (Courtesy of Jonathan Ficara)

During those years, I did what the church teaches her priests to do: I remained obedient, discreet and loyal to the institution. I did not seek public recourse. I did not pursue civil remedies. I did not frame myself as a victim. I believed that the church was just and would therefore respond justly.

Sadly, the absence of any response from authority, together with the explicit framing of the incident as a "boundary issue," suppressed my ability to grasp the full extent of what had occurred. It produced a dissonance that mounted and worsened without clear explanation, as my formation inclined me to trust the church's judgment over my own experience. In that context, my capacity to name the harm clearly or to press for accountability was not simply diminished, but constrained by the very structure to which I belonged.

What I did not understand then is that remaining within the structure made justice functionally impossible. What this meant in practice is difficult to overstate.

Any effort to challenge my bishop's handling of the matter from within the system would have required me to place myself in direct opposition to the very authority upon whom my ministry, assignments, evaluations and livelihood depended. To pursue accountability while remaining obedient would have required a contradiction the system itself does not permit: to submit to the authority of a bishop while simultaneously contesting his exercise of that authority.



Episcopal coats of arms hang in the Cathedral of St. Patrick in Norwich, Conn. (Wikimedia Commons/Farragutful)

Within such a structure, meaningful challenge is not neutral — it is destabilizing, and it carries consequences borne entirely by the subordinate. As long as I remained in active priestly ministry, dependent and under obedience, I did not have standing to confront power without risking reprisal, marginalization or removal.

In practice, this dependence rendered sustained self-advocacy psychologically and institutionally untenable, leaving me effectively voiceless from within, even as the impact of the harm, compounded by the diocese's failure to respond, continued. Eventually, the cost of carrying this unresolved harm became unsustainable, and I took a leave of absence from ministry.

Only after stepping away from active priesthood in October 2022 did that constraint begin to lift, finally granting me clarity and a renewed sense of freedom to emerge in ways I had not anticipated. No longer bound by obedience, evaluation or vocational dependence, I experienced a perspective that had previously been inaccessible to me. What had once felt confusing and indefinable could finally begin to be named for what it was.

That this clarity and freedom became possible only after stepping away from the priesthood troubles me deeply. A system in which clarity, self-respect and recourse become accessible only from the outside warrants careful examination. While I remained in ministry, my ability to pursue justice was constrained not because the harm was unclear, but because the structure itself shaped how it could be understood and addressed.



Fr. Jonathan Ficara, then pastor and campus minister at the University of Connecticut, welcomes students back to campus in 2021. (Courtesy of Jonathan Ficara)

Only nearly a decade after my original disclosure did I learn as a matter of fact that no record of my disclosure existed and that no action of any kind had ever been taken.

Working in professional environments outside the church taught me that boundaries, documentation and accountability are standard practice, making it clear to me that what I had experienced inside the church was not "discretion," but the absence of process and accountability. That absence, I later concluded, was structural, not accidental.

I later learned that the priest involved had never been contacted or questioned. Even after I filed a formal written complaint to the diocese in April 2024, no diocesan investigation occurred at that time. This was confirmed for me during the *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* process, when those overseeing the review informed me that, during the

priest's *Vos Estis* interview, he stated that it was the first time he had heard my complaint.

For those who are not familiar, *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* is a set of universal norms issued by Pope Francis in 2019 establishing procedures for reporting allegations of sexual abuse and for investigating bishops accused either of committing abuse or of failing to respond appropriately to such allegations.



Malta Archbishop Charles Scicluna, left, and Bishop Juan Ignacio Arrieta, right, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts, together with Alessandro Gisotti of the Vatican press office, present Pope Francis' document on abuse norms, *Vos Estis Lux Mundi*, at the Vatican May 9, 2019. (CNS/Robert Duncan)

Vos Estis has resulted in justice in some cases, including the resignation of the late Bishop Richard Stika of Knoxville, Tennessee.

Still, critics worried even when *Vos Estis* was being implemented that it did not go far enough to protect victims, a concern that my own story sadly proves to be correct.

A diocesan investigation was opened only later — after the initiation of the *Vos Estis* process in the summer of 2024 concerning the bishop's handling of my disclosure, and after I raised the matter with the newly installed bishop in July 2025.

Because the *Vos Estis* review concerned the bishop's actions rather than the underlying allegation of sexual harassment, those overseeing the review advised me to raise the matter with the newly installed bishop. I did so through written correspondence and during a meeting with the new bishop in July 2025. Following that meeting, a diocesan canonical investigation into the original complaint was initiated. Absent that renewed disclosure, it is unclear whether any investigation into the underlying allegation would have occurred. At the time of this writing, that investigation remains ongoing, with no clarity provided to me regarding its scope, process or outcome.

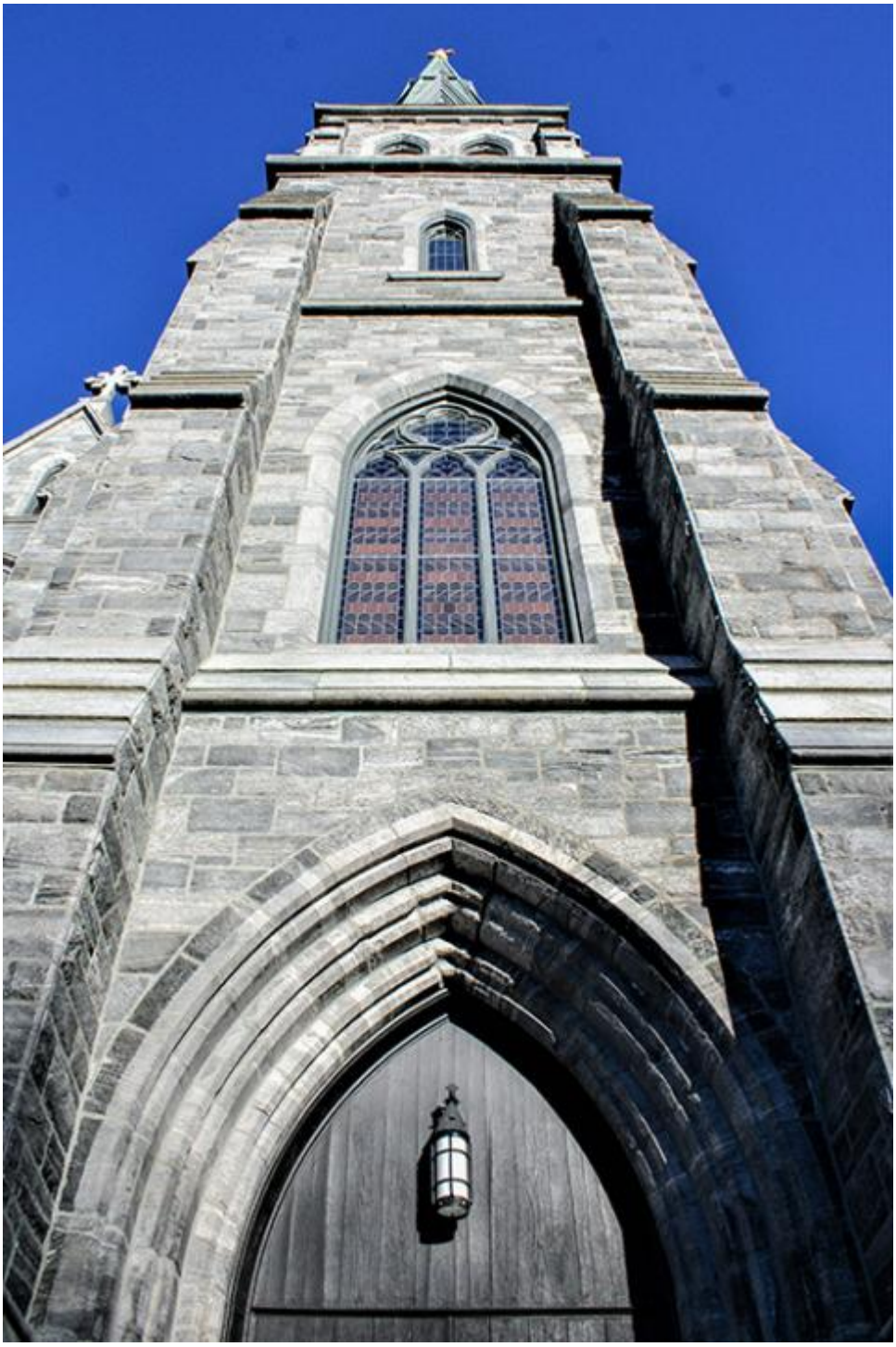
> Silence was rewarded with belonging, while truth-telling required separation.
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When the norms of *Vos Estis* were later applied in my case, my testimony was taken and I was informed that it was credible and that diocesan procedures had not been followed. Yet the process remained internal and its outcomes opaque. I was provided no written findings, no record of conclusions, and no explanation of what resulted. When the bishop retired in September 2024, I was told, in effect, that the matter had reached its end, since the *Vos Estis* process applies to active bishops and he was no longer in office by the time the review concluded.

This sequence troubles me deeply.

In practice, justice became accessible only once one no longer belonged: Silence was rewarded with belonging, while truth-telling required separation.

I recognize that my own diocesan bishop's failure to act represents a grave personal and pastoral lapse, and I do not presume that such failures are universal. Yet my concern extends beyond any single individual.



The façade of the Cathedral of St. Patrick in Norwich, Conn. (Wikimedia Commons/Farragutful)

Even when ecclesial processes are followed in good faith, the current system relies heavily on discretion, internal control and hierarchical dependence in ways that leave those who come forward insufficiently safeguarded. My experience reveals not

only a failure of action, but the limits of a structure that lacks clear, independent and durable protections for those seeking justice from within it.

I do not write this to assign blame to individuals, but to name a structural reality that stands in tension with the church's own moral teaching. A system that requires the vulnerable to choose between fidelity and truth places them in an impossible moral bind. It risks confusing obedience with silence, unity with denial and endurance with holiness.

If my experience is not to be repeated, then the conditions that rendered justice inaccessible must be examined with equal honesty. With humility, I offer the following safeguards for continued reform. Each is intended to address structural vulnerabilities that persist even when procedures are followed in good faith:

- Clear formation and education for seminarians and newly ordained clergy regarding reporting mechanisms, rights and safeguards, including what constitutes a report, what follow-up can reasonably be expected, and how concerns may be pursued when initial responses are inadequate.
- A clearly identifiable and independent reporting pathway for clergy, particularly those newly ordained, through which concerns regarding harassment or misconduct by senior clergy or others exercising authority can be raised without exclusive reliance on episcopal discretion or internal hierarchical channels, especially where a power imbalance is present.
- Explicit and enforceable protections against retaliation, ensuring that clergy who come forward can do so without fear of reprisal or informal sanction, and without being forced to choose between truthfulness and continued belonging.

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- Mandatory documentation and written acknowledgment of all disclosures, ensuring that reports are formally recorded, preserved and communicated, and that silence does not substitute for prudence or accountability.
- Transparency regarding process, including confirmation of receipt, explanation of how concerns will be reviewed, and communication when no action is taken, so that uncertainty and psychological burden are not borne solely by the reporting party.

- Structural independence in the investigation and review of allegations involving bishops or senior clergy, such that authority, investigation and judgment are not concentrated within the same office — particularly where prior inaction may itself be at issue.
- Guaranteed access to independent pastoral, psychological and practical support for clergy who come forward, so that the personal cost of disclosure is not privately absorbed during institutional review, and so that care remains available regardless of process, timing or outcome.
- The establishment of a durable and transparent accountability process for episcopal failures, such that findings of credibility or procedural noncompliance are formally documented, preserved and communicated, and do not lapse or effectively terminate due to retirement, reassignment or changes in office, leaving acknowledged institutional failure without resolution or repair.

Most Holy Father, I still love the church. I still believe in her mission and in the Gospel she proclaims. My life today is one of service, healing and accompaniment — values I learned precisely through my priestly formation.

But I can no longer pretend that my experience was an anomaly. It reflects a deeper tension between hierarchical self-protection and the church's call to justice. I offer this witness not in bitterness, but in hope that those who seek justice within the church's walls are not required to leave them in order to find it.

With filial respect and sincere prayer,

Jonathan Ficara
Former priest of the Diocese of Norwich

Editor's note: *Bishop Richard Reidy of the Diocese of Norwich, Connecticut, who was installed in April 2025, responded to a request for comment before publication with:*

"I cannot comment on the letter and the matters it raises. However, in all matters, I take very seriously the duty to investigate allegations and complaints in accordance with the applicable requirements of canon and civil law, including the confidentiality of investigations and any legal processes that may follow."

Read this next: For adult victims of sexual misconduct in the church, canon law is finally catching up