



Bishop Hicks' Column

August 2022 | Marking 20 years
of reforms to protect children



During a recent conversation with a longtime friend, she mentioned she had just signed up to volunteer at her parish by teaching religious education to fifth- and sixth-graders. I was overjoyed to hear that she was going to use her talent and time to pass on our faith to our youth.

When my friend told me of the multistep process she had to go through to be approved as a volunteer, I nodded my head in understanding – and waited for a complaint. Instead, she said she was impressed by and proud of her Church for its commitment to keeping children safe.

As a bishop, I was heartened to hear her words, especially when we in the Catholic Church are this year marking the 20th anniversary of the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*. Known as the Charter, this document sets out a mandated blueprint for dioceses to follow to create a safe environment for children and vulnerable adults in our churches, schools and activities.

My friend, like all other volunteers who work with minors and vulnerable adults in the Catholic Church, had to submit to a criminal background check. She also created an account with the parish administrator of a national training program that combats child sexual abuse. She then took the training class, followed by a class on mandated reporting of child abuse or neglect required by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). She also was required to read the Diocese of Joliet's policy regarding sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable adults, in addition to the diocesan standards of behavior for those working with minors and vulnerable adults. She signed and dated forms stating she had read these policies and standards. She also filled out a volunteer application.

None of these steps is intended to discourage volunteers, but the Catholic Church is committed to creating and maintaining a safe environment for minors in all situations. All diocesan clergy and employees follow the same process, with the addition of reading monthly continuing education materials.

The Charter also puts in place a transparent and supportive process to receive and respond to allegations of sexual abuse by clergy of individuals when they were minors. The Catholic Church takes seriously every allegation that is brought forth, be it reported by an individual who suffered abuse or a third party. The first step is always the same: All allegations of abuse and/or neglect of minors are encouraged to be reported to the state child welfare agency – the DCFS hotline (1-800-25-ABUSE) here in Illinois – and the local civil authorities.

Dioceses also report the allegation to these agencies, and offer the help of a victim assistance coordinator to the individual who suffered the abuse. The victim assistance coordinator listens to, affirms and connects the individual with the appropriate services. This same pastoral care is offered when the alleged abuser is deceased.

Dioceses then undertake an investigation into the abuse allegation. The same investigative process is followed when the accused priest or deacon is deceased or already listed on the diocesan list of credible allegations of sexual misconduct with minors. If the priest or deacon is in active ministry, he is removed while the investigation is ongoing and advised of his right to counsel. If public authorities conduct a criminal investigation against the cleric, the diocese defers its own investigation until that public inquiry is concluded, and cooperates fully with civil authorities.

Following the diocesan investigation, allegations against clergy not on the diocesan public list go before the diocesan review board. The Charter requires this panel to be composed of a majority of lay people not employed by the diocese and to include a pastor and a person with expertise in the treatment of minors who have been sexually abused.

The review board advises the bishop in his assessment of the allegations and the cleric's suitability for ministry. Priests or deacons determined to have credible allegations are permanently removed from ministry and placed on the diocesan list, which is published on the diocesan website. When the allegation is found to be unsubstantiated, the cleric is returned to active ministry.

The most recent report on the implementation of the Charter – dated May 2022 – shows the impact of the Catholic Church's commitment to protecting minors and vulnerable adults. The number of credible allegations reported against clergy nationwide has decreased from a high of 162 in the five-year period from 1970-1974 to four in 2021. I encourage you to read the report at the following link:

www.usccb.org/offices/child-and-youth-protection/auidits

Policies, procedures and data inform our vigilance against abuse, yet we must always keep sight of the victim/survivors. Thankfully, no new credible allegations have surfaced during my time in the Diocese of Joliet, yet I hold in my heart a mantra I learned while serving as vicar general of the Archdiocese of Chicago: "Any decision we make should be made as if the child were in the center of the room." †