



LETTER TO THE CLERGY AND FAITHFUL IN THE DIOCESE OF LEEDS

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ

I have asked your parish clergy to make available to you a copy of the *Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the People of God*, which was published by the Holy See last Monday, 20th August 2018.

The publication of the *Letter* follows news in recent weeks from a number of countries around the world of reports where bishops, leaders of religious congregations and other leaders within the Church have failed to protect children and young people from sexual abuse and, in a distressingly great number of instances have tried, or have appeared to try, to cover-up that abuse.

Together with murder, there is surely no greater or more terrible a crime than to corrupt or destroy the physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual innocence of a child. The sexual abuse of a child is such a crime.

When the abuse of a child or young person takes place in a family, the consequences of that terrible crime affects not only the victim but every member of that family and beyond. Abuse corrupts the love that should unite a family and destroys the trust that ought to provide the safe haven where a child can flourish.

When the members of a family fail to listen to a child who is suffering, or has suffered, from abuse, this is reprehensible. When the members of a family fail to act to protect a child that they know is suffering from, or has suffered from, abuse, this is indefensible.

The fact that such abuse has happened in the family of the Church and that some of those who were called to watch over that family have neglected to listen to and protect its children from abuse - constitutes the most serious failure of those shepherds who are supposed to tend for the very children and 'little ones' which Christ himself commanded us to safeguard in our care.

As a bishop, a shepherd and a 'spiritual father' to the family of the Church, I feel a deep sense of shame at what has taken place over a period of decades and I am immensely sorry for all the pain that has been felt by survivors as a consequence of the failure by members of the Church to listen to them and protect them. I know too that the clergy and religious of my diocese feel the same.

But our sense of shame and our expressions of sorrow are cold comfort, too little, too late, and of little reassurance to many of the survivors of abuse. Simply repeating that the majority of the abuse took place in the past and that now the Church in this country has sound safeguarding policies and procedures in place is just not enough.

Only the voices of the survivors of abuse, those who feel strong enough and brave enough, and are willing to assist the Church, can help us to understand what needs to be done, not least how my accountability, and the accountability of bishops and other leaders in the Church can be reformed. In this regard we have much to learn from the Survivors Advisory Panel to the National Catholic Safeguarding Commission in England and Wales, but the contribution of survivors must extend beyond and be heard in every country where the Church is present.

There is though something which all of us as members of the family of the Church constantly need to undertake, and is sorely required of us now. It is what Pope Francis has called for: “a personal and communal conversion that makes us see things as the Lord does” and the need to “beg forgiveness for our own sins and the sins of others” through fasting, penance and prayer.

I ask that, as a diocesan family, we make this the subject of our prayer and the spiritual offering of our Friday penance during the course of the next year. Let us pray that the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ will bring hope to the suffering and healing to the wounds of those who have been hurt by abuse.

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✠ Marcus Stock
Bishop of Leeds

This Letter was given at Leeds on the 22nd August 2018 and appointed to be made available, together with the ‘Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the People of God’, in all Churches and Chapels of the Diocese on the 26th and 27th August, 2018.