Bishop Vann Addresses Recently Announced Lawsuit Alleging Decades-old Clergy Abuse

Descripción

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As shepherd and servant of the Catholic faithful of the Diocese of Orange but also as a committed member of our Orange County community, I would like to take this opportunity to offer additional significant information and reflection with regard to the recently filed lawsuit alleging child abuse 27 years ago on the part of Richard Coughlin, a priest long since removed from ministry and the founder of the All American Boys Chorus, and to reaffirm our continued commitment to protecting children and young people and working to heal past wounds to the best of our very human ability**.**

Our Diocese and the Church have publicly acknowledged past failings and have apologized personally to the victims of abuse and their families and worked to reach a fair resolution of every legitimate abuse claim, enabling victims to begin their healing. The Diocese of Orange reached several such settlements with victim survivors of Richard Coughlin as part of the global settlement reached in January 2005. This bold initiative to settle these long past clergy abuse cases in a respectful and humble manner and to institute strict procedures for the protection of children and young people has been seen as a model for others.

Under the leadership of my predecessor Bishop Tod Brown, the Diocese also took the unprecedented step of releasing all appropriate personnel files related to this settlement in May of 2005. Additionally, shortly after I was installed as Bishop of Orange, I directed that the identity of all priests removed from public ministry related to the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People be made publicly available on our website. The Diocese, at about the same time, initiated a program of regular contact with, and monitoring of those priests permanently removed from ministry, but not laicized, due to violations of the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People to ensure they are following the terms of their removals from ministry.

I have personally witnessed the loss of faith among victims of abuse and the pain inflicted by a fractured relationship with their community of faith. As part our effort to promote healing we have long provided third-party counseling support and I have now directed that we begin to offer a spiritual advisor to assist them in healing both mentally and spiritually from their victimization. As a Church we seek to support victims emotionally, mentally, and seek reconciliation with their faith community. We have resources such as support groups and spiritual direction available for victims which will be made available to them.

The subject of this very troubling case, Richard Coughlin, was ordained for the Archdiocese of Boston in 1953 and incardinated in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles in the 1960s, predating the Diocese of Orange, which was created in 1976. Coughlin left parish ministry upon founding the All American Boys Chorus in the early 1970s. Upon receiving allegations of abuse against Coughlin, then Bishop Norman McFarland moved quickly to permanently remove him from ministry in 1993 and reported the initial complaint to Child Protective Services and the local police. Coughlin has not served in any approved ministerial capacity since that time. As part of our commitment to encourage healing and reconciliation on the part of victim survivors, the Diocese reached a financial settlement with several past victims of Richard Coughlin as part of its global settlement. This was the right thing to do to assist these victims in moving forward with their lives.

As part of our efforts to ensure these sad and tragic events of the past are not repeated, in 2002 the Diocese implemented a far-reaching set of policies and procedures to create the safest environment possible to protect children and young people entrusted in our care. The Diocese of Orange employs a comprehensive background screening for all adults likely to be in contact with children – already over 75,000 have been vetted. This process allows for the collection of a wide variety of past screening data, including extensive backgrounds checks and fingerprinting, and is designed to enhance already in place diocesan policies.

Since 2002 all clergy, employees, and volunteers have been required to undergo Safe Environment Training. In 2016 alone, the Diocese trained 252 priests, 136 deacons, 2,038 teachers, and more than 28,300 school employees and volunteers. Our schools and Religious Education classes at parishes and diocesan centers also provide age appropriate Safe Environment education. In 2016, nearly 54,000 children participated in this critically important awareness program.

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In addition to these important background screening and educational training requirements, the Diocese follows these important procedures:

• The Diocese cooperates with law enforcement and appropriate agencies in the reporting of incidents of childhood sexual abuse. We consistently advise that if you are at all concerned about a situation, call us, but first call the police.

• Since 2002 we have empowered an independent oversight review board to investigate any and all claims of childhood sexual abuse.

• Pamphlets outlining our policies are made available at parishes and schools.

• Every member of the clergy and every employee has read and signed the diocesan policy on sexual misconduct.

• Seminaries have committed themselves to thorough and current psychological screening and education prior to admission to the priesthood.

• Background checks are conducted for all seminarians, priests, and religious brothers and sisters.

• All of our elementary schools use RCL Benzinger Family Life Series and our religious education programs have incorporated Circle of Grace, a safety education program to their religious education curriculum. This provides age-appropriate education for our children and information for teachers and parents.

• Our high schools have all developed a safety education curriculum.

• For nearly 15 years the Diocese has had a reporting line for anyone who has a concern about acts of childhood sexual abuse.

I personally and all within the Diocese remain committed to ensuring that the events of the past are not repeated and we remain vigilant in protecting our children and young people. The Church has worked hard to protect children. Much has been done but more needs to be done. Until the sexual abuse of minors is no longer a part of society and culture, our ministry and efforts to protect and to heal where there has been injury will continue.

Sincerely in Christ,

The Most Rev. Kevin Vann, J.C.D., D.D.

Roman Catholic Bishop of Orange

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