

His Excellency Bernard Hebda, Archbishop of Saint Paul and Minneapolis
777 Forest Street
Saint Paul, MN 55106-3857

Monday, September 10, 2018

*An Open Letter to Archbishop Bernard Hebda of Saint Paul and Minneapolis,
From Young Adults and Other Members of the Archdiocese,
Concerning the Clerical Abuse Crises and Our Church*

Dear Archbishop Hebda,

We write to you as young adults and other members of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis. In the first place, we would like to thank you. You entered our Archdiocese during a time of grief and turmoil, the lowest point in our local Church history. We were not only driven into financial bankruptcy, but we also had to face a time when the moral legitimacy of the Church came under question from both the pews and the broader community. As our new Archbishop, you suddenly became responsible for a terrible situation which you did not create. We thank you for your willingness to come and be with us in our suffering, to take responsibility for the failures of others, and to commit to this work as a significant part of your apostolate. Unfortunately, as you know, the work arising from the abuses of this Archdiocese is not over, and ensuring a safe and flourishing community will be a constant effort.

Concerning this work, we offer you our accompaniment. This Archdiocese has a vibrant and passionate young adult community, as we hope you have seen in our responses to the recent crises in our Church. We have organized a prayer vigil and a discussion evening, each attended by more than one-hundred young adults, and we have begun creating resources and materials so that we can encourage thoughtful and informed responses to these crises. We will continue to develop this work, and we encourage you to please reach out to the young adult community if there is any way we can assist you in your work.¹

Our ongoing conversations and education have showed us the need for continued efforts and changes. Even while recognizing that our Archdiocese has made tremendous advancements in addressing abuse, as in the seventeen child protection protocols announced in 2014, we have observed that much hurt, confusion, and mistrust persists. This continued suffering merits addressing. We cannot step away and pretend it does not exist. Thus, in order to create light,

¹ We encourage a four-fold response to these crises, consisting of prayer, education, dialogue, and action. You can find more about our recent work at YArespond.wixsite.com/Catholic.

promote healing, and build trust, and after significant discussion and reflection, we offer the following recommendations:

Concerning survivors:

1. Explicitly and publicly waive all confidentiality provisions of past settlement agreements with survivors of clerical sexual abuse. While we understand that the 2002 *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* forbids dioceses from binding survivors of sexual abuse to confidentiality agreements without their request, we worry that such agreements may have been put in place prior to the *Charter*, and it is possible that survivors may be confused as to their ability to speak freely. Bishop Ronald Gainer of the Diocese of Harrisburg stated the same in his August 1, 2018 statement on waiving all such provisions in his diocese.² Therefore, we ask that our Archdiocese publicly waive these past confidentiality agreements. If the Archdiocese has already committed to a waiver, we ask that this waiver be shared publicly. We believe that this public commitment will help build trust and promote healing.

Concerning transparency and accountability:

2. Conduct an external audit of the information concerning clerical abuse provided to the John Jay College of Criminal Justice between April 2003 and February 2004, and to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University. Both organizations have released academic studies on the nature, scope, causes, and contexts of clerical abuse in the United States but have relied largely on self-reporting by individual dioceses. Given past practices of our Archdiocese concerning the characterization and disclosure of clerical abuse, the surveys provided to these organizations may contain false or incomplete information, particularly concerning abuses occurring at the time of disclosure. In order to ensure accurate information in understanding and analyzing clerical abuse, to promote academic integrity, and to take responsibility for our failures to adequately address these issues, we recommend an external audit of this information, as well as a full accounting of its results and, if necessary, an apology to the researchers who dedicated their time and energy to understanding and articulating these crises.
3. Reopen the 2014 investigation of Archbishop John Nienstedt with a mandate to pursue any sexual misconduct or canonical failures in the handling of abuse cases, and provide a full accounting of this investigation. In addition, ask all those engaged in the 2014 investigation to publish their preliminary findings, as well as accounts of the level of openness, transparency, and cooperation from the Archbishop and Archdiocese at that time. As we have learned over the last several weeks, secrets in the Church only create

² <https://www.hbgdiocese.org/statement-from-bishop-gainer-on-child-sexual-abuse/>

greater harm in the long run, especially when it comes to abuse by Church leaders.

The closure of the 2014 investigation into Archbishop Nienstedt left the laity of this Archdiocese with confusion, frustration, and speculation. We feel that the truth was, and continues to be, stolen from us. If the allegations of sexual misconduct surrounding Archbishop Nienstedt are partially or completely true, we deserve to know the extent of their veracity. If the allegations are partially or completely false, he deserves to have his name cleared. We long for closure and healing and, while we cannot truly compare ourselves to those who have been direct victims of abuse, in this regard we feel that we have all been victims to a cover-up. While the investigation may be a matter of national and international importance to some, for us it is a *personal* matter. By reopening the investigation, and allowing the truth to come to light, this sets a precedent for what we can expect of *our* Archdiocese in the future.

Concerning lay involvement:

4. Increase financial transparency and accountability, especially through increased lay authority. We understand that the Archdiocesan requirements for Parish Finance Council membership were last updated on November 6, 2012.³ According to these requirements, the Parish Finance Council possesses no decision-making authority and is solely a consultative body. In addition, members of the Parish Finance Council either are selected solely by the pastor or are elected after a pastor has unilaterally approved the candidates. The pastor has “final authority in determining membership” on the Parish Finance Council and, “with the approval of the trustees, has the discretion to remove any member of the Parish Finance Council with or without cause.”⁴ While this may suggest that the parish trustees can exercise independent lay authority in the parish, these trustees are selected solely by the pastor, the Vicar General, and the Archbishop.⁵ In addition, any changes to the constitution and bylaws of the Parish Finance Council must be approved by the pastor and the Archbishop. The result is that, in cases where any lay member, or the Parish Finance Council as a whole, comes to a fundamental disagreement with the pastor, the pastor and Archdiocesan leaders can overcome any lay action. The laity are effectively powerless to protect the financial health of their parishes in circumstances where their pastors and Archbishop choose to make financial decisions with which they disagree.

We therefore recommend: removing from the Archdiocese’s Parish Finance Council requirements the ability of the pastor and Archbishop to unilaterally select and remove trustees, requiring consent from the laity of the parish for trustee appointments,

³ <http://safe-environment.archspm.org/200-administration/207-parish-finance-council-requirements/>

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<http://safe-environment.archspm.org/200-administration/208-parish-finance-council-template-constitution-bylaws/>

⁵ <http://safe-environment.archspm.org/200-administration/206-parish-administration/>

empowering the laity to independently appoint or elect Parish Finance Council members, and vesting the Parish Finance Council with the power to make decisions to protect the financial health of the parish. We recommend a structure in which neither the pastor nor the Parish Finance Council can act unilaterally without the consent of the other or the public intervention of the Archbishop. In addition, we recommend that the pastor and trustees only be given the authority to remove Parish Finance Council members after demonstrating grave cause.⁶ Though we hope that circumstances where the laity and the pastor seek contrary financial decisions will be rare, we believe that these changes will help to ensure the financial health of parishes and encourage the laity to be more forthcoming about their views on the management of parish finances.

5. Provide avenues for increased involvement of the laity in the assignment and evaluation of priests in their parishes and other ministries. The complete lack of authority on the part of the laity to participate in decision-making concerning the administration of their parishes contributes to the current sense of helplessness felt by many lay persons to respond to and resolve the crises in our Church. Providing real opportunities to influence decisions regarding parish administration will encourage both lay leadership and clerical accountability. Here, we provide two recommendations.

First, we understand that the Archbishop currently has the exclusive right to appoint priests to parishes, though a Comprehensive Assignment Board assists in the selection process by providing counsel and offering recommendations. However, the current processes for parish appointments presume that the laity should have little to no involvement in the assignment of their pastors, either as decision-makers or as consultants. The Archbishop appoints all members of this Board which consists of at least nine members, all of whom the Archdiocesan Policy Compendium presumes will be clergy.⁷ According to the Compendium, “When pastoral circumstances seem to require it, the Archbishop may also choose to appoint a lay ecclesial minister.”⁸ Now more than ever, pastoral circumstances do necessitate this. Therefore, we recommend the inclusion of additional lay persons on the Comprehensive Assignment Board and amending the Compendium so as to require this inclusion.

Second, the lay parish trustees should also be involved in the selection of pastors for their particular parishes. Again, lay involvement is recommended “when pastoral circumstances seem to require it” and the present circumstances establish this need. But

⁶ The recommendation of requiring cause in order to remove a Parish Finance Council member simply mirrors the Archdiocese’s own provisions for Justice in Employment. Certainly, these standards should be applied to parish positions just as the Archdiocese expects their adherence in employment contexts.

<http://www.archspm.org/sections/justice-employment/>

⁷ These include: the Archbishop as President, the Director of Clergy Placement Services, the Director of the Diaconate, the Director of the Office for Priestly Life and Ministry, the Director of the Parish Services Team (multiple Director positions may be held by the same individual), five priests, and one deacon (appointed by the Archbishop).

⁸ <http://safe-environment.archspm.org/300-clergy/303-comprehensive-assignment-board/>

in any event, the appointment of a *pastor* to a parish constitutes the beginning of *all* pastoral circumstances. And certainly the members of the parish will be best suited to understand and articulate its history and needs and to consider the fitness of potential pastors. Therefore, we recommend the inclusion of the lay trustees for each parish when the Comprehensive Assignment Board provides counsel and makes recommendations for their parishes. And we invite the Archdiocese to explore further opportunities for lay leadership, involvement, and decision-making at both the parish and Archdiocesan level.

Concerning education:

6. Provide expanded professional training on the most recent research concerning abuse to priests, Church leaders, and seminarians of the Archdiocese. Though the Archdiocese has mandated training for clergy and Archdiocesan volunteers and employees on sexual abuse and misconduct, additional training is required so that they understand not only how to avoid and report such conduct, but also how to articulate and approach these issues as leaders and speakers in the Church. In our conversations with the young adult community, many observed that priests seem timid and afraid to talk about these issues. While some priests have addressed their parishes in ways that have contributed to healing and dialogue, parishes throughout our Archdiocese have not seen a unified message about the causes of abuse. Many feel that the responses of their parishes have been based upon narrow apologetics rather than facts and professional findings. Many expressed a desire for priests and Church leaders to address the crises in our Church in holistic and research-grounded ways. Abuse is a complex issue that requires more than gut reactions and apologetics, and we desire more from our priests, who should be taking this issue seriously and rigorously educating themselves.

To this end, the young adult community offers its support. We are willing to provide presentations and facilitate discussions based on our study of these issues. More will be needed, however. Therefore, we strongly encourage the Archdiocese to engage secular experts in this area to provide further educational opportunities for our priests, leaders, and seminarians on the causes and contexts of abuse and best practices for prevention.

7. Conduct a survey on the awareness of lay persons regarding the changes to Archdiocesan policies over the last four years on reporting cases of clerical abuse. Most of the laity remain unaware of the seventeen child protection protocols, where to find information on the removal of priests due to abuse, how reports are gathered and handled, and how and when such information is shared at the parish level. Such a survey can help identify local demographics in need of further awareness and education so that we can recognize the strides made in responding to incidents of abuse and educate the laity on the resources and protections available to them.

Concerning our pastors and their personal responsibility for these crises:

8. Finally, we offer a recommendation for all pastors, clergy, and Church leaders throughout this Archdiocese: Take personal responsibility for these crises and publicly accept the moral guilt associated with the sins of our clergy and Archdiocesan leaders. Clergy who have openly said before their parishes, "I am guilty," have promoted healing, transparency, and accountability by recognizing the roles that we all have played in contributing to these crises. However, some pastors have *solely* issued calls to prayer, diagnosed these crises as the problems of other persons, or insisted upon action and education on the part of the laity. Such pastors have been perceived as diverting responsibility and refusing to make these crises their own. The persistence of pastors who see themselves as exempt from responsibility continues the frustration and sorrow of the laity.

Rather than *telling* the laity what to do and what to think about the abuses of the clergy and the leaders who have perpetuated and hidden these abuses, we recommend that each pastor be instructed to offer a forum for *listening* to the fear, frustration, and sorrow of his parish. This can be conducted through listening sessions, "town hall" meetings, or facilitated discussions.⁹ In addition, we recommend that each pastor publicly acknowledge the corporate guilt of himself and his brothers and ask for the forgiveness of his parish. The present circumstances require no less, given his commitment to stand *in persona Christi*, who was crucified, died, and was buried on behalf of all sinners. Therefore we urge that each priest consider this crisis his own personal responsibility and reflect upon ways in which *he* is called to change through prayer, education, dialogue, and action. As the laity, we commit ourselves to this work, and we ask nothing less of our priests.

This letter is not an exhaustive list of the actions to be taken if we are to take seriously our responsibility to create light, promote healing, and build trust in our Archdiocese. Rather, these are initial steps. We encourage you to dialogue with every member of the Archdiocese to ensure that we meet the varied and diverse needs of its members, especially as we all struggle to pursue holistic and informed responses to these crises.

Even as we call our Archdiocese to do more, we recognize that *we* are part of this Archdiocese, that this is also *our* Church. Your responsibilities are *our* responsibilities. Every Catholic has a responsibility to ensure that our Church is safe, compassionate, and committed to following Christ in word and deed. The Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici* speaks of the complementarity of the members of the People of God, drawing together clergy, men and women religious, and the lay faithful all as "labourers in the vineyard." It is in the spirit of the essential complementarity of the clergy and the laity that we come to you. And it is in this spirit

⁹ We strongly recommend the format of a facilitated discussion, and we have made the video, PowerPoint presentation, and other materials from our very fruitful young adult discussion available at <https://yarespond.wixsite.com/catholic/dialogue-materials>

that we feel *called* to challenge our Archdiocese to do more. And we invite you to also similarly call upon us to make changes, continue learning, and collaborate with Church leadership.

In Christ,

Catholic young adults of the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis:

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Erin M. Schoenbeck
Our Lady of Lourdes

Nathan Cornwell
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Additional signatures will be available at: <https://yarespond.wixsite.com/catholic/the-letter>