

20 YEARS OF HEALING AND PROTECTION



CHARTER FOR THE PROTECTION OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

June 2022 marks the 20th Anniversary of the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*. The Catholic Bishops of the United States passed the *Charter* in June 2002 as a comprehensive set of procedures to address allegations of sexual abuse of minors by clergy. For many, an anniversary of this sort may not seem cause for celebration. After all, the past 20 years have shown that our work to “*rid the Church of the scourge of the sexual abuse of minors and to open pathways of reconciliation and healing for those who were abused*” (Pope Francis, 2015) is far from finished. So why acknowledge this anniversary? Why mark such a painful year? Why celebrate the *Charter*?

Breaking the Silence

Everything about sexual abuse pulls for silence. Adults who abuse work to avoid discovery by instilling shame and fear in those they harm. Children who suffer abuse are silenced by this shame and fear, and the perception that they are alone in their experience. Adults called to love and protect children fear scandal and judgement when they fail to protect. In 2002, enabled by mass media and technology, the silence of abuse was broken in a way that could not be ignored.

Results of the first national abuse study commissioned by the US Bishops illustrate the tremendous impact of breaking this silence. The study, conducted by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, found that between 1950 and 1985, eight hundred forty allegations of abuse by clergy were known to the Catholic Church in the United States. More than double that number were reported between 1985 and 2002, following national news of allegations of abuse by a priest in 1985. Following the worldwide media coverage of abuse by clergy in 2002, more than ten thousand individuals who had suffered in silence for decades were empowered to share their stories. As directed by the *Charter* all dioceses and eparchies in the country appointed a Victim Assistance Coordinator to receive allegations of abuse and facilitate healing. When the silence was broken, Victim Assistance Coordinators were there to help thousands of individuals seeking healing and justice. This important ministry continues to provide hope and healing.

Uniting Action

The Church has always considered the sexual abuse of children both a sin (prohibited in the ancient Didache of the first century) and a crime (punished through formal Church laws as early as 306 AD). Canons prohibiting abuse can be found in the first formal book of Canon Law. Civil laws prohibiting the abuse of children are much more recent, with the first laws in the United States emerging in the early 1870s. The civil definition of abuse, the penalties, and even the mandate to report abuse varies by state and it is the responsibility of individual jurisdictions to legislate and enforce such laws. The *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* created a *unified* framework to address abuse and exploitation within the Church. For the first time dioceses in various civil jurisdictions across the entire country were acting together in healing and reconciliation of victims and survivors; prompt and effective response to allegations, cooperation with civil authorities, discipline of offenders, the creation of safe environments for children and youth, and accountability for the future.

Leading the Way

The unified action of the *Charter* resulted in unprecedented change - both within the US Catholic Church and within secular culture. Within two years of the *Charter's* implementation, dioceses across the country had reviewed policies, appointed victim assistance coordinators and diocesan review boards, and developed training, education, and prevention programs. Each year since, as many as 2.6 million adults are trained to recognize and respond to abuse and 3.6 million children are educated in the signs of right relationships versus abusive ones and how to seek help from an adult. Victim Assistance Ministries in 196 dioceses and eparchies located in all 50 states provide ongoing outreach and healing. Annual conferences allow diocesan personnel to join efforts with international experts in prevention and healing. Diocesan-developed safe environment training programs are utilized by other churches and community organizations. Catechists, teachers, youth ministers, volunteers and parents bring the trauma-sensitive perspective they have developed through safe environment training into school and community organizations. Children have had the opportunity to experience right relationships with adults and peers; and have the tools they need to seek help for themselves or others when a relationship isn't right. Through homilies, bulletins, and parish announcements, parishioners now have a new understanding of the devastating effects of abuse, its warning signs, and how to seek help. Parish communities have lifted those harmed by abuse in prayer for 20 years and continue to pray for prevention and healing. As abuse has become evident in other parts of the world and in secular organizations, the model of the *Charter* and those involved in its implementation have been called upon for guidance. The impact of the *Charter* has been far-reaching and has led the way for prevention and healing efforts in the worldwide Catholic Church, other communities of faith, and the broader secular culture.

Throughout the past 20 years, the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* has helped to break the silence of abuse. It has opened "*pathways of reconciliation and healing for those who were abused*" and has directed unified action to "*rid the Church of the scourge of abuse.*" The *Charter* and all who implement it continue to lead the way for parents and other adults to provide safe environments for their children and for children to experience right relationships. Come, celebrate with us!

Details about 20th Anniversary Masses and Prayer Services in the Diocese of Grand Island throughout the month of June are available at <https://www.gidiocese.org/news-events>

For more information on the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People go to: <https://www.usccb.org/offices/child-and-youth-protection/charter-protection-children-and-young-people> or contact the Diocese of Grand Island Child Protection Office at: 308-382-6565 or cpo@gidiocese.org