

Press Release 11-22-06

Bishop Kevin W. Vann comments on the settlement with 11 victims and the upcoming release of accused priests' files

We want to address two events of major importance concerning allegations of abuse by priests of the Catholic Diocese of Fort Worth: the settlement of a lawsuit involving 11 victims of abuse, brought against the estate of James Reilly and the Diocese of Fort Worth, and the upcoming release of the redacted files of seven priests accused of sexual misconduct with minors, by the court of Tarrant County District Court Judge Len Wade on Monday, Nov. 27, 2006.

Bishop Kevin Vann would like to publicly address the 11 persons seeking redress for abuse, "Even though I am relatively new here and did not know James Reilly, I want to apologize publicly and say here and now how sorry I am for what each of you have been through, which affects your lives and your families to this day. I am appalled, ashamed, and angered that any priest acted in this way — presenting himself one way, acting in another. It was a breach of trust; a time that should have been one of faith and growth became a time of fear, tragedy, and loss of faith."

He also offers them his assurance that he has "personally reviewed the programs and procedures in our Diocese, required by the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People that aims to protect God's children." The Diocese has been found to be in compliance with the Charter's requirements in every audit conducted since their passage in 2002. He offered his personal assurance, saying, "I am committed to dealing with any claim as quickly and pastorally as possible."

As part of this commitment, Bishop Vann has been working with Fr. Jim Gigliotti and other priests of the Diocese to have what is called a Mass of Reparation at St. Maria Goretti Church to ask God's forgiveness and to publicly acknowledge the crimes against these victims. Bishop Vann states, "It is absolutely necessary that we apologize in a public manner for these actions by James Reilly which have brought so much turmoil into the lives of these men."

At the request of the 11 victims, the Diocese will not disclose the identities of the victims, details of the settlement, nor the amount of the settlements. As part of the Diocese's commitment to these victims' healing process, their request for confidentiality will be honored.

The second issue the Diocese wishes to address today refers to information we shared with everyone on August 11. At that time, Bishop Vann spoke on the topic of the Diocese's decision not to oppose the release of the redacted files of seven priests accused of sexual misconduct with minors, an action then anticipated by Tarrant County District Court Judge Len Wade. At that time, he recalled that in his recently completed first year as Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Fort Worth, he had found a dedicated group of priests, deacons, and religious, and faithful parishioners in a vibrant and active church body. He also spoke of encountering other people's pain and suffering from sexual abuse still in need of healing. That pain was endured by young Catholics years ago and exacerbated through past decisions within our Church.

"I deeply regret the pain and suffering caused to victims of these actions," he said. "And now, as the substance of these accusations is brought into the light of day, I again offer my personal, heartfelt apology to those who may have suffered abuse by members of the clergy. Such acts are both sinful and criminal. Any act of abuse is a violation of sacred trust. It is all the more painful because it takes the innocence and childhood of the one abused. And in some cases, it even damages the ability to believe in the goodness of God and in the reliability and trustworthiness of those who are expected to represent him."

Bishop Vann continued, "Moreover, the damage of abuse in the Church has injured not only

those directly victimized, but the rest of us who have lived with this loss and the betrayal of our own sense of trust. The pain the rest of us have experienced is certainly not as great as that of the victim-survivors, but it is nonetheless considerable, and all of us pray that this sinking sense of sadness will come to be supplanted by healing and reconciliation.

“To that end, the bishops of the United States in June of 2002, in Dallas, adopted a new policy, by issuing an historic document entitled the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, which was reviewed and refined by the Holy See. At that time, the president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory, spoke of the document: ‘We have thus made a solemn commitment to our people that the priesthood will not be used to harm a child.’ Later that same year, Bishop Gregory said, ‘We did this because, as bishops individually and collectively [we] have acknowledged, there were mistakes and failures in our handling of cases of abuse of minors by clergy. They were serious ones, but they are not attributable to intentionally bad acts but, most often, to a lack of awareness of the extent to which this behavior entails a deep sickness which is resistant to treatment.’

“In pursuing a remedy for those failures,” Bishop Vann continued, “The Charter committed the Bishops to the following:

- Zero tolerance of any sexual abuse of minors;
- The removal from ministry of a priest or deacon when even a single act of abuse of a minor has been established;
- Stringent reporting procedures to civil and church authorities following allegations of abuse;
- Openness and transparency in the Church’s response;
- A strong sexual abuse prevention program to reduce the likelihood of such abuses occurring in the future.

“In three independent audits conducted by the Gavin Group since 2002, we in the Diocese of Fort Worth have been found to be in full compliance with the Charter,” said Bishop Vann.

“Our Diocese implemented Called to Protect, a comprehensive state-of-the-art sexual abuse prevention program that applies to children, youth, clergy, employees, and volunteers who serve in the Diocese.

“In order to maintain this safer atmosphere, we must be ever vigilant in guarding our behavior and in monitoring the behavior of those with whom we work and volunteer. Each and every one of us must truly live our Faith.

“In the next days and weeks,” he said, August 11, “portions of the personnel records of seven priests accused of sexual misconduct with minors will be released to the public. These are the records that the interveners in the case — the Dallas Morning News and the Fort Worth Star-Telegram — had requested be released. In August we announced that we would not appeal Judge Len Wade’s decision to release portions of the priests’ records to the public.

“It is extremely distressing and painful to have read these files. I find it all the more painful because I grew up surrounded by great examples of what the priesthood should be. The failure of some to live up to these high standards can’t help but spur all of us to a deeper commitment to values of holiness and fidelity to our Lord Jesus and to his people. We must not allow our anger and our dismay at the betrayal by some of these men of our deepest values and of our trust to separate us from our Lord and his Church.

“I fervently hope that the release of these records,” he said, “will mark the beginning of a new era for the Diocese of Fort Worth and for our larger community.

"I want to once again acknowledge the faithful service and extraordinary dedication of the overwhelming majority of the priests in our diocese. The regrettable and devastating actions of a few priests do not tarnish or damage in any way that fidelity to holiness and the service of others.

"Addressing the Catholics of our Diocese," Bishop Vann said, "I want you to know how much I personally appreciate your faithfulness and loyalty to your Church. We all desire a just outcome for the victims of abuse at the hands of not only priests, but by anyone who serves the Church.

"As I do each time this painful subject is approached, I ask anyone who has either witnessed or has suffered sexual abuse by anyone who serves the Church to come forward so that we can continue the healing process.

To report abuse to the civil authorities, call the *Texas Department of Family Protective Services* (Child Protective Services) at 1 (800) 252-5400. To report abuse to the *Diocese of Fort Worth* call Judy Locke, our Victim Assistance Coordinator, at (817) 560-2452, ext. 201 or e-mail her at jlocke@fwdioc.org or call the sexual abuse hotline, (817) 560-2452, ext. 900. Or call The Catholic Center (817) 560-2452, ext. 107 and ask for the Vicar General, Father Michael Olson.