

## Listening Sessions: Responding to Questions, part one

By Bishop David Ricken  
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Over the past month, I have participated in a series of listening sessions at parishes throughout the diocese to hear from you about how you are being impacted by the news of sexual abuse within the church. The emphasis of these gatherings was on listening rather than responding. However, I invited you to share your questions with me with the promise that I would address them.

Thank you so much to those of you who submitted questions. We have received hundreds of them and I have personally read every one. In doing so, I noticed several themes emerge and in this and upcoming issues, I intend to address several of these questions as best I can. In this issue, I want to start by focusing on the context of the current sexual abuse crisis as well as offering some suggestions on how people might respond to those who are skeptical about the church right now.

### **I thought we addressed this problem in 2002. Why is this still happening?**

In many ways we did address this problem in 2002. At that time, when news broke about the sexual abuse crisis in the church, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) implemented the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People. The Charter addressed issues such as reporting allegations of abuse to civil authorities, removal of clergy with credible allegations of abuse, ministering to victims-survivors, and conducting background checks and providing training for employees and volunteers who work with youth to ensure necessary security and safety. Since that time, the Diocese of Green Bay has followed the guidelines of the Charter, though many of the policies of the Charter were already in place locally prior to 2002.

The recent accounts of sexual abuse have focused primarily on a grand jury report from Pennsylvania that attempted to identify the scope of this problem in six of the state's eight dioceses. This two-year investigation was done with cooperation from the dioceses. The horrific accounts that were included in this report are heartbreaking and rightfully have shed light on the ugly reality of what has been done by some leaders in the church, both those who abused and those who covered it up.

This report covered the past 70 years and the vast majority of cases that were released in this report occurred prior to 2002. In no way does this minimize what has taken place, but it provides some evidence that the steps taken in 2002 are having an impact. The grand jury report acknowledges this progress on the part of church leadership.

Even though many of these cases occurred prior to 2002, the truth is that even one case of abuse is one too many. It is also important to recognize the impact of this news for victims-survivors and their families, both in Pennsylvania and throughout the country. Each story of abuse can reopen the wounds they feel from their own experience, which is why it can feel as though this problem is not getting any better.

As can be seen in the above chart, which records allegations from across the United States, abuse within the church nationally has been declining going back to the 1980s. The accounts of abuse currently in the news are in line with this trend that abuse is declining. But the goal is to have no cases and we are still not there.

Locally, we want to be able to provide you with a picture of the progress that we have made by sharing information about the number of cases of abuse that have occurred in the diocese over the years. To ensure the accuracy of that picture, we have contracted with an independent, third-party firm to conduct an external review of our files. Their report will go to our Diocesan Independent Review Board and our Chancellor. Upon their recommendations, I will determine how to share the results of this review with the public. My hope is that by doing so, we can begin to regain the public's trust that we have learned from past mistakes and we are making every effort to overcome this horrific sin that has occurred in the church.

**How do I respond to the criticism that I am hearing of the church? How do I explain it to people who have left the church or who are not Catholic?**

This is an important question that all of us need to wrestle with. In some ways, we each have to determine the appropriate ways to explain what is going on depending on who we are talking to. All I can do is provide some things for you to consider as you have these conversations.

It's important to state that our goal should not be to defend what is indefensible behavior. We must acknowledge the real pain that this has caused for so many people, especially the victims-survivors and their families. We should also recognize that this is an extremely emotional issue. People are entitled to their emotions, so we don't want to be dismissive of the way they are feeling.

Ultimately, I can't tell you what words to use when responding. All I can do is share with you what I might say when I hear these criticisms. Here are some of the things that I would say.

One child victimized in this way is one too many. The terrible things that have happened to children by clergy and others in the church, or by any responsible adult for that matter, cause me grave sorrow.

In the United States, the church has been responding to this problem since 1985 and has been increasing their response dramatically since 2002, when the Charter was published. I am confident that this response is working the way it is intended, but we are continuing to learn and make improvements. Sexual abuse is a human problem and seems to be widespread across society. The church has been part of the problem and we are striving now to become part of the solution.

Those who have committed abuse have betrayed the church. This evil is not the church, but the church has allowed it and has committed at least the grave sin of negligence. This is what we must repent about and be ever more vigilant so that this does not happen again.

Finally, in responding to others, we must be prepared that our words might not be satisfactory to some. People might decide to leave the church as a result of this. All we can do is continue to love them as Christ loves us and, perhaps one day, through the experience of that love, the Holy Spirit will draw them back to the church.

**How can I trust the church leadership after all this?**

Again, this is a question all of us will have to deal with personally and there are no easy answers. Trust must be earned and unfortunately trust has been lost. It seems we are in a time where many have lost their trust in the leadership of the church, and in this diocese, I know some have lost their trust in me. I am deeply sorry for the things I have done or failed to do that have led to this distrust.

I know that my words alone will not earn back your trust. That's why I am committed to being even more diligent in responding to this issue. We must do better and my prayer is that in doing so, we can regain your trust. To that end, I will continue to be transparent about the actions we are taking to address this problem.

These are just some insights I can offer as I begin addressing your questions. I know they may not be satisfactory to everyone, but I hope there may be something of value for you as we all work to make sense of what is happening right now. In upcoming issues I will address additional questions regarding how reports of abuse are handled and what steps are in place to prevent this from happening in our diocese.

I thank you for your continued prayers and patience as we work to bring healing to all people who have suffered as a result of this crisis.