



# Catholic Pastoral Center

## Diocese of Brownsville

Office of the Bishop

**Statement by the Most Rev. Raymundo J. Peña**  
**Bishop of the Diocese of Brownsville**

*February 27, 2004*

The tragic events of the last year and a half present us with a particular need to examine our life as Church in the United States. In order to have a clear picture and more fully understand the issues at hand, we, the Bishops of the United States, commissioned the John Jay Study and elicited the independent assessment of the National Review Board for the Protection of Children and Youth. The data in the reports that they issued today are sobering, indeed alarming. The sexual abuse of children by people they love and respect is a societal problem. That some members of the clergy, endowed with a sacred trust, have sinned in this way is of exceptional concern, and it elicits profound sadness. The abuse left deep scars in the lives of the victims and of their families, and greatly tested the faith of Catholics in their Church's shepherds. To the victims and their families, on behalf of the Church in the Valley, I say that I am sorry and that we will do all in our power to ensure that this never ever happens in the future.

In examining our clergy personnel files, the Chancellor has determined that twelve credible allegations of sexual abuse of minors have been received in regard to seven diocesan priests. While the number may seem small in itself (it represents about 3% of the diocesan priests who have served in the 35 year history of the diocese), it is comparable to the national average (about 4 % of all priests over the last 50 years). None of them are in active ministry and, to my knowledge, not one has any regular contact with young people.

The abuse of even one child is one too many. Those who have been unfaithful can be compared to the people of Jesus' hometown of Nazareth. Jesus was amazed by their lack of faith, and he did not work many miracles there. Why did it amaze Christ to see their lack of faith? He supported his teaching with miracles. Why did they not believe? Were they blind to God's action in their life?

We will never fully understand why some priests have been unfaithful. We know they have done wrong, and we pray, with the many faithful priests, that these wayward brothers may heed the voice of the Lord, "Return to me with all your heart!"

We pray even more fervently for those who have been their victims. We pray the Lord to grant them healing. We pray the Lord to enable the Church to respond creatively and responsibly to satisfy their troubled hearts. We invite them to come to us, so that we may

help provide the tools that will bring healing and peace to their lives. They may contact me or the Vicar General, Father Robert Maher at (956) 784-5067 or (956) 542-2501, Dr. Gregorio Piña, licensed psychologist at 1-800-270-7004, Sister Norma Pimentel, M.J., Director of Catholic Social Services, at (956) 784-5075, or Mr. Walter Lukaszek, assistance coordinator, at 784-5066.

In an effort to reach out to those who have suffered abuse and offer them assistance, I have also asked Dr. Gregorio Piña, a licensed therapist in McAllen, to facilitate a support group for victims, in a totally confidential setting. He may be contacted directly through a toll-free number 1-800-270-7004.

Additionally, the diocese has appointed an Assistance Coordinator to offer immediate assistance to victims; adopted new *Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines for Ethical and Responsible Conduct in Ministry*; introduced a nationally recognized safe environment program of education and prevention of child sexual abuse called *Protecting God's Children*; and established a policy requiring criminal background checks of all clergy and religious, of all church employees, and of all volunteers who have regular contact with minors or vulnerable adults.

We want to help the victims, and we will listen to them. While we have taken several steps to ensure a safe environment for children and young people and to bring healing for those who have been harmed, we realize that more needs be done. We cannot change the past, but we can and must guarantee a much brighter future.

As the Church in the Valley, our pledge is that we will do all in our power to create a healthy and safe environment for all our children in the Church and in society. Through our program for Protecting God's Children, we will work together as a Catholic Community to create a safer world for our children. The program focuses on knowing the warning signs of a potential abuser in order to protect children; carefully screening everyone who works with our children; protecting our children by closely monitoring all programs; being aware of what is happening in the lives of our own children; and communicating when we have concerns about inappropriate behavior or suspected abuse.

Please pray with me, first and foremost, for the victims and their families, for those who offended them, and for the Church in the Valley. Thank you and God bless you.