

Diocese of Kalamazoo
Communication Policy
Dealing with Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors¹
OCTOBER 2003

Introduction

Article 7 of *The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*², approved by the Bishops of the United States on November 19, 2002, mandates that “[e]ach diocese/eparch will develop a communications policy that reflects a commitment to transparency and openness...” with regard to allegations of sexual abuse of minors by clergy. The Diocese of Kalamazoo’s compliance with all the directives effected by *The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, and the *Essential Norms for Diocesan/Eparchial Policies Dealing with Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests, Deacons, or Other Church Personnel* is an attempt to display the Diocese’s dedication to “provid[ing] safety and protection for children and young people in our church ministry and institutions” (*Charter Preamble*) and deal with allegations of abuse appropriately. Through this communications policy the Diocese of Kalamazoo seeks to outline the ways it will continue to:

1. Express the Diocese of Kalamazoo’s commitment to the spiritual and emotional well-being of all victims of sexual abuse by clergy.
2. Express confidently that the Diocese of Kalamazoo, and the whole Catholic Church in the United States, is committed to the protection of children and young people.
3. Reflect a “transparent and open” relationship with the public with regards to sexual abuse of minors by clergy.
4. Take a proactive stance in publishing information about diocesan policies, statistics, and cases of sexual abuse of minors.
5. Promote accurate reporting of the facts regarding these policies, this information, and these cases.
6. Rebut and correct misimpressions regarding the same.
7. Develop and maintain a working relationship between the Diocese of Kalamazoo and media outlets.
8. Define a clear line of communication pertaining to this subject.
9. Make readily available (through diocesan media, i.e. newspaper and website) the diocese’s policies, contact information, other applicable information with respect to this subject.

Determination of Catholic Bishops and the Diocese of Kalamazoo

The Diocese of Kalamazoo and the Catholic Bishops of the United States have taken a number of steps to address the evil of sexual abuse of minors by clergy. The 2002 drafting and approval of *The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, and the *Essential Norms for Diocesan/Eparchial Policies Dealing with Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests, Deacons, or Other Church Personnel*, as well as the subsequent implementation of these documents are undoubtedly the most significant measures taken to ensure that allegations of sexual abuse are dealt with appropriately. Furthermore, we remind ourselves that “our obligation to protect children and young people and to prevent sexual abuse flows from the mission and example given to us by Jesus Christ Himself, in whose name we serve” (*Charter Preamble*). The Diocese of Kalamazoo recognizes its obligation to victims of sexual abuse by clergy, and of abuse in general. It is committed to the spiritual and emotional well-being of all, and fully intends to portray this commitment through all its public acts and communications.

Dioceses and some bishops have, too often in the past, treated victims as legal adversaries. We recognize that this attitude and treatment can be extremely damaging emotionally, and often severs the victim's relationship with the Church. The Diocese of Kalamazoo's obligation to all the faithful of the Diocese, its parish communities, and its mission (to bring all people closer to Christ through His Church) dictates that it will honestly defend its legal interests and assets. However, the diocese will not attempt to intimidate or discourage anyone who brings forth an allegation. Rather, the diocese will, through the victim assistance coordinator, offer them the appropriate counseling, spiritual assistance, or support group. The Diocese will also "in every instance advise victims of their right to make a report to public authorities and will support this right" (*Charter* Article 4.). Furthermore, the Diocese of Kalamazoo will continue to reach out to all who may have been traumatized by abuse, by clergy or otherwise, and invite them to come forward so that the healing process can begin.

"Transparency and Openness"

It is the Diocese of Kalamazoo's intention to be "transparent and open" in discussing sexual abuse of minors by clergy, where it can reasonably do so³. The Diocese has and will continue to fulfill all the legal requirements for reporting cases of sexual abuse of minors by clergy, and cooperate fully with law enforcement agencies. We intend to willingly share information, as openly as possible, with the faithful of the diocese and with the public as a whole. The Diocese and its bishop recognize their responsibility to take the faithful into their confidence, so that the faithful in turn will have confidence in the bishop and his representatives. The Diocese will reach out and assist the communities directly affected by ministerial misconduct. Whereas rumors and misimpressions are unhealthy and detrimental to the necessary healing processes, the Diocese of Kalamazoo will, through transparent discussion and disclosure of pertinent information, foster an environment disposed toward healing. Likewise, the Diocese of Kalamazoo fully intends to cooperate with media outlets to communicate "transparently and openly" with the public.

Communication with the public through media outlets

1. After initial investigation

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Kalamazoo Policy Dealing with Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors states that "[w]hen an allegation of sexual abuse of a minor against a priest, deacon or other Church personnel is brought forward, the Victim Assistance Coordinator or Delegate of the Bishop shall:

- A. Contact the individual making the complaint and/or other appropriate parties without delay to obtain the basic information needed to make the report to civil authorities.
- B. Initiate a preliminary investigation, in harmony with canon law, promptly and objectively. All appropriate steps shall be taken to protect the reputation of the accused during the investigation. The accused shall be encouraged to retain the assistance of civil and canonical counsel and shall be notified of the results of the investigation. When there is sufficient evidence that sexual abuse of a minor has occurred, the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith shall be notified..."

It is here, "when there is sufficient evidence that sexual abuse of a minor has occurred", that the Diocese of Kalamazoo will, through the Diocesan Director of Communication, volunteer information to the public, through the local media outlets. This will be done in conjunction with informing and assisting the parish community affected, and the canonical measures taken. The Diocese will protect the reputations of all individuals involved in volunteering this information, as neither a civil or canonical judgment will have been made at this time. The information that will be provided at this time will be:

- A. That there has been an allegation of sexual abuse of a minor against a cleric;
- B. Whether the person making the allegation is currently a minor;
- C. Whether the person making the allegation is male or female.

The individual making the allegation's name and personal information will not be provided, unless he or she specifically requests that they be made public. Someone who brings forth an allegation may want to remain anonymous. If this is the case, the only information that will be revealed is that an allegation has been made by someone who wishes to remain anonymous. Moreover, the Diocese of Kalamazoo will not obstruct any accuser's attempts to make their allegations public. Otherwise, unless specific circumstances warrant it, no other information will be provided at this time.

2. Upon judgment confirming an act of sexual abuse of a minor by a cleric has occurred

When the Bishop of the Diocese of Kalamazoo, after consulting with the Diocesan Review Board, judges that an act of sexual abuse has indeed occurred, the Diocese of Kalamazoo will, through the Diocesan Director of Communication, volunteer information to the public through local media outlets. This will be done in conjunction with informing and assisting the parish community affected, and the canonical and/or criminal measures taken. The Diocese of Kalamazoo will volunteer the following information at that time:

- A. That the Bishop, after consulting with the Diocesan Review Board, has made a judgment on a particular case, and what the judgment is.
- B. The offender's name
- C. Whether further actions, canonical or otherwise will be taken against the offender, as well as explain the offender's future relationship with the Diocese of Kalamazoo.
- D. Other releasable information, such as whether there is a civil suit pending, assistance offered to the victim, and other specifics of the case (See Note #3).

3. When an allegation is not supported by credible evidence or judged unfounded

When the Bishop of the Diocese of Kalamazoo, after consulting with the Diocesan Review Board, judges that there is not credible evidence that an act of abuse has occurred, or an allegation is proven unfounded, the Diocese of Kalamazoo will release information on a case by case basis. The Diocese reserves the options to:

- A. Volunteer this information to the public, through local media outlets
- B. Release this information upon request from media outlets
- C. Reveal information to the faithful through diocesan media, i.e. newspaper and website
- D. Attempt to restore the person's reputation through various outlets
- E. Any combination of these options

Full and Accurate Reporting

The Diocese of Kalamazoo will make every effort to ensure that all information relevant to cases of sexual abuse of minors by clergy, diocesan policies, and procedures is reported fully and accurately. It will do so through:

- A. Contacting and establishing a healthy working relationship with media outlets
- B. Cooperating fully with reporters, and editors of these media outlets
- C. Making disclosable information and pertinent details available to these outlets in a timely fashion
- D. Answering questions regarding this information, and following up on all unclear issues
- E. Publishing the Diocese's information publicly by use of diocesan media, on its website, and in its newspaper
- F. Correcting all misreporting, via direct discussion with outlet editors and reporters, and by use of diocesan media

The Communications Officer of the Diocese of Kalamazoo will make the aforementioned information available for the outlets via press releases; face to face, telephone, and e-mail interviews; and through available diocesan media.

Additionally, the Diocese of Kalamazoo has established, on the diocesan website (www.dioceseofkalamazoo.org), a prominent link entitled "Safe Environment" that directs one to the Safe Environment website. This link serves as a platform for the Diocese of Kalamazoo to make public, in a very accessible way, the Diocese's policies, procedures, program for establishing a safe environment and its contact information. Moreover, all the information located here will be made available, in other formats, upon request.

Single Spokesperson

The Diocese of Kalamazoo will communicate with the public through one spokesperson. The Director of Communications for the Diocese of Kalamazoo will be the media contact for all inquiries pertaining to the Diocese's sexual abuse policy, procedures, and cases. Information about cases of sexual abuse, diocesan policies, and other pertinent information will likewise be disseminated to the Catholic faithful and the public through the Director of Communications. All parishes, schools, and other Catholic institutions will be directed to forward inquiries related to sexual abuse of minors by clergy to the Director of Communications. His/her name and contact information will be well published, so that there is no confusion as to who should be contacted.

The circumstance may present itself where someone other than the Director of Communications is the appropriate person with whom media outlets should speak. The Director of Communications will facilitate the communication between these parties. The Director of Communications will also facilitate all communication with the Bishop of the Diocese of Kalamazoo, should it be judged that he is the appropriate person to answer media requests.

Conclusion

While this policy is formally assembled to comply with Article 7 of *The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, the Diocese of Kalamazoo recognizes it as a unique opportunity to serve its faithful and the public better. Moreover, many of the specifics of this policy have been informally in effect for many years. Through this communications policy, the *Diocesan Policy*

Dealing with Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors, the implementation of safe environment programs, background checks, the institution and funding of our *Trauma Recovery Program*, and other similar measures the Diocese of Kalamazoo is attempting to ensure that children are protected and allegations of sexual abuse are dealt with appropriately.

In the words of the *Charter*:

“We pledge most solemnly ... that we will work to our utmost for the protection of children and youth.

We pledge that we will devote to this goal the resources and personnel necessary to accomplish it.

We pledge that we will do our best to ordain to the priesthood and put into positions of trust only those who share this commitment to protecting children and youth.

We pledge that we will work toward healing and reconciliation for those sexually abused by clerics”
(*Charter Conclusion*).

Notes:

¹ This communications policy is separate from and not to be confused with the *Roman Catholic Diocese of Kalamazoo Policy Dealing with Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors*, which outlines, among other things, the procedures taken when the diocese receives an allegation of sexual abuse of a minor by clergy, and other church personnel.

² Article 7 of *The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* states: “Each diocese/eparchy will develop a communications policy that reflects a commitment to transparency and openness. Within the confines of respect for the privacy and the reputation of the individuals involved, dioceses/eparchies will deal as openly as possible with members of the community. This is especially so with regard to assisting and supporting parish communities directly affected by ministerial misconduct involving minors.”

³ Cases in which the victim has asked the diocese to keep information private, matters under litigation, and unsubstantiated allegations, are among the few exceptions.