



Communications Policy

Roman Catholic Diocese of Erie

Prevention and Response to Sexual Abuse of Minors By Priests, Deacons, and Others who Work/Volunteer for the Church:

This Communications Policy is adopted in response to the commitment made by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in the 2002 *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*. This diocesan policy reflects a commitment to openness in a manner which respects the privacy and reputation of all persons who are involved in or affected by matters pertaining to sexual abuse of minors (USCCB, *Charter*, Article 7).

Responsibility for the observance of this policy belongs to the diocesan Communications Director. Only those persons designated by the Bishop may speak on his behalf and on behalf of the Diocese of Erie. Any statements, observations, or opinions offered by another not designated as a diocesan spokesperson are to be understood as personal or private remarks, not necessarily reflecting an official communication of the Diocese of Erie or any of its parishes, schools, institutions or agencies.

The Diocese of Erie uses a number of ordinary means of communicating to the Catholic community and the public, including the diocesan newsletter, FaithLife Bulletin, the diocesan website at www.eriecd.org, the diocesan *Information Bulletin*, and various letters issued by the Diocesan Bishop or his delegate. Diocesan policies concerning the prevention and response to sexual abuse of minors by priests, deacons, and others who work or volunteer for the Church are already available to the public on the diocesan website.

As appropriate and as determined by the Communications Director in consultation with the Diocesan Bishop or his delegate, other means of communication (including the various newspapers, television and radio stations serving the thirteen counties of northwest Pennsylvania that comprise the territory of the Diocese of Erie) may be used to publish the policies of the Diocese of Erie concerning the prevention and response to sexual abuse of minors and to address inquiries into allegations of sexual abuse, according to what is established in this Communications Policy.

Communication with the Accuser or Victim

Communication with those who have made a complaint of sexual abuse of minors or those who are themselves victims of such abuse takes place especially on two levels:

- *Pastoral.* The Victim Assistance Coordinator will have direct communication with anyone reporting abuse or the victim, as well as their families, in order to see to it that appropriate pastoral care is provided. Also, the Diocesan Bishop either personally or through his delegate may communicate directly with anyone reporting abuse or the victim, as well as their families, in order to “listen with patience and compassion and to share a sense of solidarity and concern” (USCCB, *Charter*, Article 1).
- *Canonical.* Every allegation concerning sexual abuse of minors will be taken seriously. The canonical preliminary investigation will be conducted as required according to Article 5 of the USCCB, *Essential Norms for Diocesan/Eparchial Policies Dealing with Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests or Deacons*. Direct communication with the one reporting abuse or victim by the Diocesan Bishop or his delegate is essential to that investigation.

In accord with the USCCB *Charter* and diocesan policy, the Diocese of Erie will not enter into confidentiality agreements except for grave reasons and only at the initiative of the victim who must freely request it. This policy and the right to make a complaint of sexual abuse of minors directly to public authorities will always be communicated to the accuser or victim (USCCB, *Charter*, Article 3).

Communication with the Accused

Once an allegation has been received, the Diocesan Bishop or his delegate will communicate with the accused in accord with the *Essential Norms* and diocesan policy. Unless circumstances suggest otherwise, the Diocesan Bishop or his delegate will maintain contact with the accused during the preliminary investigation and any subsequent procedures.

Communication with Parishes, Schools, Diocesan Institutions or Agencies

Whenever it is necessary or appropriate, the Diocesan Bishop or his delegate will provide information regarding an allegation or the investigation to a parish, school, institution or agency of the diocese to which the accused is connected. This will only be done with due regard for the rights of the accused and the one filing the complaint, and with due regard for the danger of public scandal and the public good.

The Diocese of Erie will provide information regarding services to bring about healing and reconciliation in a parish, school, institution or agency of the diocese to which anyone associated with the matter has a relationship. Likewise, the Diocese of Erie will communicate to clergy, religious and all members of the community the standards of conduct for priests and deacons and other persons in positions of trust and any information regarding safe environment programs (USCCB, *Charter*, Articles 6, 12).

Communication with Other Dioceses or Religious Communities

Whenever an accusation concerning sexual abuse of minors in the Diocese of Erie is made against a priest or deacon from another diocese, or against a member of a religious order or congregation, or against an employee or volunteer from another diocese or ecclesiastical organization from outside the Diocese of Erie, the Diocesan Bishop or his delegate will undertake appropriate and timely communication with that person's superior or supervisor.

Whenever a priest or deacon of the Diocese of Erie, who has been permanently removed from all ministry because of the sexual abuse of a minor, wishes to reside in the territory of another diocese the Diocesan Bishop or his delegate shall notify the Bishop of the diocese in which that individual wishes to reside (USCCB, *Essential Norm*, 12).

Whenever a priest or deacon from another diocese or a member of a religious order or congregation wishes to transfer permanently or minister or be employed for a time in the Diocese of Erie, the Diocesan Bishop or his delegate shall first inquire from that individual's superior about his/her suitability for service in the Diocese of Erie. Most especially, it should be determined whether the individual has ever been accused of sexual abuse of minors (USCCB, *Essential Norm*, 12).

Communication with Public Authorities

Whenever the Diocese of Erie has received a complaint of sexual abuse of minors by a priest, deacon, employee or volunteer, the matter will be immediately reported to the appropriate public authorities. The Diocese of Erie will continue to comply with the mandated reporting laws of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, even as it applies to priests or deacons. The Diocese will cooperate in any investigation conducted by public authorities in accord with the norm of law (USCCB, *Charter*, Article 4).

Whenever circumstances suggest it and even when no allegation of sexual abuse of minors is under investigation or adjudication, the Diocesan Bishop or his delegate may meet with public authorities in the various civil jurisdictions of the thirteen counties of northwest Pennsylvania in order to discuss those steps

that are taken to protect children and youth against sexual abuse and to inform the public about the need to provide for that protection.

Communication with the News Media

Inquiries from newspapers, radio, television, and any other form of print, broadcast, or electronic media should be forwarded to the Diocesan Communications Director. Any release of information is subject to the responsibility that the Diocese of Erie has to safeguard the privacy and reputation of all concerned parties, including the accuser, victim, or accused (USCCB, *Charter*, Article 7). Also, the Diocese of Erie will not release information or comment on any allegation while it is under investigation or adjudication so as not to jeopardize those proceedings.

***Approved by the Diocesan Review Board
August 5, 2003***

Erie, Pennsylvania

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