



Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Lord,

Almost a decade ago when the Catholic Church in our country was dealing with the clergy abuse of children, I thought of a large stained glass window that had one small section of it broken. These works of art are made up of hundreds of individual pieces of delicately and brightly colored glass pieced together in a way that allows some aspect of our sacred history and faith to illumine our lives. Yet, if even one small part of the window is broken, our eyes are immediately drawn to the wound. Much of the beauty of the entire window, its integrated wholeness and its message, can be temporarily lost because we concentrate on the broken piece.

Years ago we recognized that some of the glass was broken. Some who were called to serve as an icon of Christ and ordained to be his presence in the midst of the community had failed in their ordination promises. Through the damaged glass, there poured a harsh glare that caused not only the church but the wider community to focus on what was broken.

With much hard work, the window in our country was repaired. By June of 2002 bishops throughout the United States had responded with a public, transparent and verifiable response to priests who harmed children. The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People was endorsed by all the bishops and put into practice. With the assistance of Pope John Paul II and the guidance of then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Essential Norms were approved that changed Church law and reformed her legal process to facilitate the removal of priests involved in sexual abuse of minors in an expeditious and decisive manner.

What is not past, however, is the pain that continues for many victims of abuse. On Good Friday, as we prepared for the celebration of the Lord's Passion at the Cathedral of Saint Matthew the Apostle, I learned that a group had gathered to pray for past victims of abuse. While it was almost time to begin our ceremony at the Cathedral, I joined the people at the prayer gathering to show solidarity with victims of abuse and to highlight the Church's ongoing concern, prayers and pastoral and spiritual ministry.

In our archdiocese we have a written child protection policy for nearly 25 years that offers counseling and pastoral care for any person who indicates that he or she was the victim of clergy sexual abuse. Over the past years, I have met personally with those who were harmed. I have, together with bishops all over the nation, listened to them, offered pastoral care and counseling and have prayed with them. Many have been able to move beyond the initial pain and have overcome alienation from the Church and especially the sacraments. Others have not. All need our continuing prayers.

The pain that they feel is shared far too often by others. Sadly, child sexual abuse knows no boundaries. It occurs in families, by teachers, youth leaders, family friends and strangers. While the media may focus almost exclusively on clergy sexual abuse, most abuse does not occur by a member of the clergy.

It is important that we remember when we see the statistics about victims of sexual abuse by clergy that we are dealing with incidences from the past, sometimes 30, 40 and even 50 years ago. Catalogued together, the impression is sometimes created that there is a disproportionate percentage of abusers in the priesthood and that the abuse continues today. Both assertions are not true.

The Catholic Church in the United States has dealt openly, effectively, and decisively in rooting out perpetrators of sexual abuse. In our country, we bishops have put in place strong standards for reporting allegations to civil authorities because we recognize abuse is not only a sin but a serious crime. In our archdiocese and in dioceses nationwide, we mandate child protection training for adults and education for children. Seminarians, clergy, volunteers and employees who work with children must undergo criminal background checks. Independent advisory boards of lay experts guide our work and, perhaps more importantly, we continue to reach out to those harmed to help them to heal them from their pain.

In 2008-09, six million children in the United States received lessons on recognizing inappropriate behavior and what to do if someone tries to harm them or makes them feel uncomfortable. Two million adults underwent background checks.

As I noted in a recent op-ed, “Priests who harmed children violated the heart of their ministry and have harmed not only our young people and our community of faith, but also the vast majority of their brother priests who faithfully live out their promises to serve Christ and his people.”

No small part of our pain and sorrow grows out of our positive experience with so many good priests. In parish after parish, our people have demonstrated and continue to do so their affection and esteem for their priests. We know that we have been well served by good priests.

As we reflect on the experience of the Church for so many years, we need to pray for our priests and at the same time encourage them and thank them for responding to God’s call, for their continuation of Christ’s ministry in the world, and for the demonstrated selfless service in meeting the sacramental, spiritual and pastoral needs of the faithful.

Only living faith can recognize the great treasure borne in earthen vessels. Belief sees beyond the failure of a few men and holds fast to the mystery of God’s goodness at work in this world for the priesthood, lived in so many, many good, effective, caring and faithful priests.

As we pray for those harmed, our community and priests, so too we pray for our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI. The majority of media coverage these past two weeks has been full of speculation, yet has omitted the tremendous work that he has done to bring healing, accountability for those who harmed children, and protection for children over many years.

During the Papal Mass at Nationals Park two years ago this month, our Holy Father said to us, “It is in the context of the hope born of God’s love and fidelity that I acknowledge the pain which the church in America has experienced as a result of the sexual abuse of minors. No words of mine could describe the pain and harm inflicted by such abuse. It is important that those who have suffered be given loving pastoral attention.”

One of the most poignant moments of our Holy Father’s visit to our city followed on that Mass. Leaving the crowd of nearly 50,000 people the Holy Father, with no media present, met with abuse survivors at the Vatican Embassy. They had a chance to speak with Pope Benedict personally

and he prayed with them, listened to their stories and offered them words of hope and encouragement, as a pastor would.

For nearly 25 years, I have had the privilege of knowing then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and now Pope Benedict XVI. On a number of occasions, I had the honor of working directly with him and under his guidance.

Over 20 years ago as a newly appointed diocesan bishop I had to face the challenge of an abusive priest and to deal with him according to the limitations placed on me by Canon Law and its interpretation at that time in Rome. One person I turned to for understanding, support and guidance was the man who now serves the Church as its Chief Shepherd, Pope Benedict XVI. The then-Cardinal Ratzinger, as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, was equally strong in his support of all the American bishops when years later we asked for changes in canon law and for special norms to expedite the removal of priests involved in sexual abuse of minors in a quick and decisive manner.

At this year's Palm Sunday Mass at Saint Matthew's Cathedral, I asked the huge standing-room-only crowd of faithful to pray for our Holy Father. Shepherding the Church universal is not an easy or enviable responsibility.

On Tuesday March 30, the leadership of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops restated our deep concern for those harmed by the crime and sin of sexual abuse by clergy and expressed our profound gratitude for the assistance that Pope Benedict XVI has given us in our efforts to respond to victims, to deal with perpetrators and to create safe environments for children.

I join those bishops as they point out that "they know from experience of Pope Benedict's deep concern for those hurt by sexual abuse and at the same time, his support for measures that protect young people today and into the future."

Over and over during Holy Week as each day the media reported the same story – a story discredited by Cardinal William Levada, now prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith and successor to Cardinal Ratzinger in that office – I called upon our faithful and our priests at the Monday Chrism Mass, the Thursday Mass of our Lord's Supper, the Friday celebration of the Passion, and again at the Easter celebration of the Resurrection to pray for our Holy Father.

Like a stained glass window, the Church shines the beautiful light of Christ's love and hope on today's world. We who see with the eyes of faith see that light, and we walk with Jesus as His disciples today, with renewed confidence in the present and with hope for a future filled with God's grace.

Pledging my prayers for you and asking yours for me, I am

Faithfully in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Donald Wuerl", with a small cross symbol to the left of the first letter.

Archbishop of Washington

Easter Monday  
April 5, 2010