

## **Promise To Protect - "Pledge To Heal**

By Bishop Victor Galeone

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: This month the National Review Board that was set up by the American Bishops will issue its report on the compliance of each diocese with the Charter *for the Protection of Children and Young People*. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops at their June 2002 meeting in Dallas adopted the charter. Old wounds will be reopened as we revisit the tragic matter of the sexual abuse of children by priests. Like you, I am both saddened and angered by anyone who would take advantage of an innocent child - and most especially when it's a priest. And so I write to reassure you that our diocese is in full compliance with the policies set forth by the charter.

Thanks to my predecessor, our diocese enacted a policy in 1985 that incorporated measures that anticipated the Dallas charter in all key areas. Then in 1988, we finalized our policy and procedures for dealing with and responding to allegations of child abuse. This included the formation of a Response Team, which is made up of members of our diocese to include laypersons.

In conformity with the charter, our diocese was audited in August 2003. This audit consisted of five days of interviews with myself, various diocesan leaders, our attorney and parishioners, in addition to a thorough review of our policies and procedures. The audit found the diocese to be in full compliance with the charter.

In any instance where a credible allegation of child abuse has been made, involving a priest, we have acted in accordance with our policies to include the removal of the priest from active ministry. There have been several child abuse allegations made since the initiation of our policies in 1985 and they have been handled appropriately. All alleged instances predated the initiation of these policies. Credible allegations have been made against four priests assigned to the diocese. These four priests were removed from active ministry and remain inactive.

We have reached out to the victims and have offered to help them. In doing so, the diocese has incurred less than \$750,000 in expenditures, which include counseling fees, legal fees and settlements. These monies were paid from general funds set aside each year as part of our self-insurance fund.

I want to express my deep, deep sorrow and apology to anyone who may have been abused by a priest serving in our diocese or anyone else in ministry. I ask forgiveness for the failure of those in authority who failed to act promptly in removing any alleged offender from his post. We are committed to protecting our children, and I assure you that we will continue to respond immediately to any allegation of abuse and will strictly follow our policies and procedures in this regard.

I ask you to pray for the victims of abuse, for their families and for all who are affected by these tragic happenings of the past. At the same time, let us not forget our faithful priests who continue to serve with dedication in the midst of the cloud of suspicion that has enveloped the church. May the Lord continue to bless you and all your loved ones!