



# DIOCESE OF ST. AUGUSTINE

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **Bishop Estévez Responds to Florida's investigation of the Catholic Church**

Jacksonville, Fla. – Bishop Felipe Estévez sincerely apologizes to the victims and their families who have been hurt over the years by members of the clergy. The damage caused by the sexual abuse of minors is devastating and long-lasting.

“We cannot apologize enough to each victim for the grave harm that has been inflicted on them and their families, and we offer our help now and for the future. The loss of trust that is often the consequence of such abuse becomes even more tragic when it leads to a loss of the faith that we have a sacred duty to foster,” said Bishop Estévez.

As was stated in the *Office of Statewide Prosecution's Report on Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church in Florida* released Nov. 6, 2020, the Diocese of St. Augustine cooperated fully with the statewide investigation, which began Oct. 4, 2018

“This has been a very painful period for all Catholics. I hope the outcome of this investigation by the state helps to build public confidence that the Diocese of St. Augustine has been proactive in its practices to protect the safety of all children and vulnerable adults,” the bishop said.

The Diocese of St. Augustine has a zero-tolerance policy for sexual abuse. Significant steps have been taken over the last 30 years to prevent such instances from occurring and hold past transgressors accountable while offering justice and healing for victims and their families. These practices, while learned over the years, have proven to be effective. The credible allegations that the diocese has received were for abuses that occurred before 1992.

The *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, and *Essential Norms* adopted in 2002, established an independent Review Board made up of professionals in the fields of law, criminal prosecution, medicine and psychology, to review and advise the bishop on allegations of sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable adults. All allegations the diocese receives that suggest potential criminal wrongdoing are immediately referred to the proper civil authorities.

**(MORE)**

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As a matter of continued vigilance, the diocese invests about \$250,000 each year for programs to protect children and vulnerable adults from sexual predators. Background screenings and awareness training for clerics, seminarians, lay staff and volunteers are mandatory. Since 1998, more than 49,000 bishops, priests, deacons, seminarians, employees, and volunteers have undergone Level 2 (FDLE, FBI) criminal background screenings. They are repeated every five years. And since 2002, more than 38,000 people have completed Protecting God's Children training by Virtus.

We acknowledge and re-affirm the faithful service of the vast majority of our clergy. They deserve our esteem and that of the Catholic people for their dedicated work. To put it in context, since 1960, 837 priests have served in parishes of the Diocese of St. Augustine, and of that number, 13 priests have been credibly accused of harming minors within the current territory of the diocese. Ten of them are deceased, and the other three have been permanently removed from ministry. We want you to know that the priests currently serving in our diocese are worthy of your trust.

Two years ago, Bishop Estévez made a commitment to the faithful of the diocese to release a diocesan list of credibly accused priests upon the conclusion of the state's investigation. He also launched an independent audit of the diocese's safe environment policies and procedures. A summary report of the audit and a list of credibly accused priests is available with this statement.

Bishop Estévez said he remains committed to doing everything possible to safeguard the physical and emotional wellbeing of every member of our Catholic family. He stands ready to work with community leaders to address the tragedy of sexual abuse in families and elsewhere in society.

"I have been given the responsibility of shepherding the people in this diocese, and with God's help and the full cooperation of the faithful, I will continue to work to restore the bonds of trust that unite us," said Bishop Estévez.

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