



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

DIOCESE OF METUCHEN

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Over the past eight months, our lives have been steeped in an exhaustive state of disorder, uncertainty, and, at times, despair. All too often, we hear in the news or read about the loss, grief, isolation, fear, and suffering endured by all people as a result of the coronavirus – no one is unaffected by this global pandemic disease. Similarly, and again all too often, we hear analogous stories of the loss, grief, isolation, fear, and suffering endured by survivors of abuse, some of whom were subject to their abuse by some members of the clergy – and again, no one is unaffected by these horrific revelations of past abuse and occurrences of lack of proper leadership by those in authority. Indeed, the times through which we are living, in our Church and in our world, are like no other.

As Catholics, the burdens of this year compound those of which we were already too keenly aware. The weight of our burdens grew heavy with the astonishing June 2018 announcement of the “credible and substantiated” allegations of child abuse by Theodore McCarrick, the founding bishop of our diocese, and the subsequent revelations of his sexual harassment and abuse of some seminarians and young priests. These burdens seemingly grew heavier with each day that followed as we learned the heart-wrenching truth of the crimes and sins of the past and wondered how Theodore McCarrick was still given greater responsibilities in the Church, despite the rumors of his abusive actions with seminarians and young priests.

Since that grave announcement, we have struggled to bear the weight of those burdens: those that come as a direct result of the sexual abuse allowed to take place in our Church; the dangerous misuse of power by some of our Church’s leaders; and the terrible conscious disregard for all God’s people by those who were once trusted with the immense responsibility of protecting His people and nurturing their faith, yet failed to do both. What is more, we now know that Theodore McCarrick scandalized some seminarians and young priests in his care, deeply harming the integrity of the mission of the Gospel.

While I am grateful to Pope Francis for ordering this study to arrive at the “truth” of what happened, like everyone else, I am disgusted and appalled by what has taken place. This report will, undoubtedly, cause sadness, anxiety, frustration, anger, disgust and pain – you are right to have these feelings. It may even reopen the fragile wounds which are so delicately and rightfully guarded by survivors who have suffered from abuse, not just at the hands of Theodore McCarrick or members of clergy, but all who have suffered abuse and its lasting effects.

To all survivors of abuse, who know and live with this pain every day, and to their families, I am deeply and wholly sorry. An essential part of my work as your bishop, as I see it, is to entrust

the wounds and past sins of sexual abuse to the healing heart of Christ in my daily prayers and sacrifices.

I have witnessed and been told that the pain of past abuse leaves survivors feeling wounded, betrayed, and guarded even in the present, in many cases even years after the abuse has stopped. These wounds of the past have created scars, perhaps in some instances faded by time, yet they will never fully disappear.

But survivors of abuse do not suffer alone; I stand with them in their brokenness and pain. I humbly ask that you join me, through your prayer and sacrifice, in walking with them in their pain. In doing so, we help to shoulder the weight of the cross; and thereby, we place Jesus at the center of our lives, the only One who truly understands our suffering and can bring about healing because “by His wounds we are healed.” (Is 53:5)

To all the faithful, who suffer the effects of the betrayal and pain inflicted by some Church leaders, I am deeply and wholly sorry.

While it is important to honestly assess our past and the failures that lie within it, to recognize our mistakes and publicly confess our sins, and to make amends and seek forgiveness, this is not enough. We must, as a Church, – and I must, as your bishop – continue to forge forward. We must remember these awful chapters in our Church’s history with sobriety and honesty, so as not to be complacent, all the while diligently penning the future chapters of our Church’s history with integrity and transparency, so we can be living witnesses of faith, hope and love.

I am grateful for the steps which we already have taken and those we continue to take forward, but know that even when we think we have done enough, we must do even more. I can report with confidence that there are no credibly accused members of clergy in active ministry in the Diocese of Metuchen. I encourage anyone who has been harmed in any way, by any clergy in the Church, to notify law enforcement by calling 1-877 NJ ABUSE and to also reach out to our Director of Child and Youth Protection at (908) 930-4558.

As you know I spent the majority of my priesthood working in priestly formation as Rector of the Pontifical North American College in Rome. It was the greatest privilege and highest honor to share in some part of helping a young man be formed to serve his life as a priest. I can assure you that in the Diocese of Metuchen, our 24 seminarians are being formed in integrity, love and authentic freedom. In the midst of this sad moment, we are blessed with the most seminarians we have had in over 25 years. We seek to intentionally prepare them in wholesomeness, to not only live their lives as holy priests, but also to have the preparedness to clearly face the challenges of our contemporary Church as healing ambassadors to those who have been broken by the tragedies of life. We are seeking to form men with a heart after Jesus’ own heart to help usher in a renewed day in the life of our diocese.

I am encouraged for the future of this local Church of Metuchen. Our diocese has not received a single credible complaint of abuse involving a minor in any of our schools or parishes by diocesan clergy since the adoption and implementation of the abuse prevention policies in 2002.

With the June 2018 announcement of McCarrick’s past transgressions, I directed that the files and archives in the Diocese of Metuchen be re-examined; no new cases were found. Then,

even before Pope Francis issued *Vos estis lux mundi*, or “You are the light of the world,” I established a senior team of advisors to examine reporting processes and developed an independent reporting structure to allow for priests, deacons and seminarians to bring forward an allegation against anyone in authority in the Church, including myself, without fear of retribution.

Gratefully, Pope Francis’ Motu proprio, which universally calls all bishops worldwide to adhere to a mandatory process to allow for the ecclesial investigation of complaints of sexual abuse and related misconduct by bishops, not just priests and deacons, as had previously been the protocol, was implemented by the U.S. Bishops this year with the launch of the Catholic Bishop Abuse Reporting service. By this measure, we can ensure that all levels of Church hierarchy are held to the same level of accountability, so that McCarrick’s shameful actions cannot be repeated. Claims can be submitted to the independent service by visiting ReportBishopAbuse.org or by calling (800) 276-1562.

In addition to the Motu proprio, several other legislative decisions came as the result of the summit on abuse called for by the Holy Father and held at the Vatican in February 2019. These decisions will help to ensure the horrific actions of the past, cannot be repeated in the future. In December 2019, Pope Francis abolished the pontifical secret concerning cases of sexual abuse of minors or vulnerable persons; cases of child pornography; cases regarding the lack of reporting and the cover-up of the abusers on the part of bishops and superiors general of religious institutes. The Vatican also issued the *Vademecum* last July, which provides procedures to help ascertain the truth in cases of minors who have suffered abuse on the part of a member of the clergy.

Our diocese has procedures in place too, which have been in effect since 2002. We require background checks for all clergy, employees and volunteers, as well as training for all who work or volunteer with children. The diocese also enforces a zero-tolerance policy and relies on a review board to determine the credibility of every allegation against clergy, if not already deemed criminal by the authorities. The review board consists of 11 members: three medical professionals, two members of the clergy, one former attorney general and supreme court justice, one former prosecutor, two former judges, one special education teacher currently sitting on the State Board of Education, and one survivor of clerical sexual abuse.

To oversee the diocese’s response to abuse, the handling of cases of abuse and the diocesan archives, in part, the diocese hired former county prosecutor Anthony P. Kearns III, Esq., as its chancellor in March 2019. Before coming to the diocese, Mr. Kearns served for nine years as the Hunterdon County Prosecutor and for four years as a Deputy Attorney General for the State of New Jersey. He is a trained mediator; family, adolescent and individual therapist; and substance abuse therapist, counseling both men and women ensnared in the cycle of domestic violence.

I invite you to learn more about the Diocese of Metuchen’s efforts to prevent abuse and offer transparency by visiting: www.diometuchen.org/healing.

If, in the past, our response was one that caused pain, let our response today be one that promotes healing; if, in the past, our response was one in favor of self-preservation, let our response today be one of charity; if, in the past, our response was one of injustice, let our response today be one of respect; if, in the past, our response was one of indifference, let our response today be one guided by compassion; if, in the past, our response evoked mourning, let our response today elicit hope.

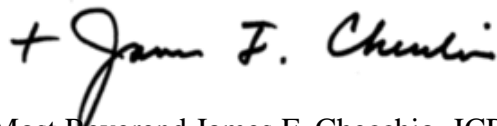
My brothers and sisters, it is providential that this report comes as we prepare to celebrate the 39th anniversary of the founding of our diocese and then, next month, the first anniversary of our diocesan consecration to Jesus through Mary under her title of Our Lady of Guadalupe. While the founding of our diocese will, unfortunately, always be associated with the history of Theodore McCarrick and the culture of abuse, silence and shame that was allowed to perpetuate in the dark corners of our past, we have a new opportunity to lead lives of increased holiness and renew our commitment to living His mission. Through both our diocesan consecration last December 12, and by our Baptismal promises, we have responded to God's invitation to be only His people, not bound to anyone else. You and I, by God's grace, have been chosen at this time in our history to rebuild His Church; that is a challenge and honor for us that we pray we have the energy, virtue and grace to do correctly.

I am confident that this local Church of Metuchen, like St. Juan Diego who cultivated roses from rocky ground in the midst of winter through the intervention of Mary, our Mother, has been set apart for something greater. We have been on rocky ground, but with the help of our Mother Mary, we will continue to cull the light of goodness from the depths of the darkness to renew our trust in God and grow closer to Him. From that, only goodness can follow.

Please know of my love and prayers for you, and certainly for all survivors of abuse and their families too. I ask that you please pray for me too. We are journeying together in woundedness, but we will find healing, mercy and hope in the only One who can offer them to us: our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

With renewed best wishes, I remain

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James F. Checchio". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial 'J'.

Most Reverend James F. Checchio, JCD, MBA
Bishop of Metuchen