

BISHOP'S STATEMENT: New Process to Assist Victims  
June 24, 2004

The settlement reached with 21 persons last month was the right action for us to take as Church. It allowed us to avoid re-victimization and lengthy, expensive litigation. The money we paid went to victims and their lawyer.

But, we are well aware that more than just these 21 persons in our Church have been hurt. Some of them came to us in the past and received assistance and support at that time. There are those victims who have coped well with their situation and desire nothing more than to be assured that the accused priest is not in a position to hurt again. Others do not wish to come forward at all. However, we are concerned that victims completely unknown to us still need our understanding and assistance. I encourage them to use our diocesan process for that purpose.

Of course, anyone having evidence that a child is currently in danger should immediately contact the proper authorities. The child abuse hotline is 800- 932-0313. The Diocese is committed to full cooperation with the District Attorneys who serve our eight county area, and the reporting of all incidents for criminal prosecution, as required by law.

While old cases normally are not handled by the justice system, many of the victims are still dealing with painful, unresolved issues. For their good and for the health and holiness of the Church, their claims need to be investigated in order to insure that unsafe persons are not still in ministry and posing a risk to our children.

The process that has been developed in the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown invites victims to seek the help of Sr. Marilyn Welch, who is our Victims Advocate (814-886-8250 or [victimadvocate@dioceseaj.org](mailto:victimadvocate@dioceseaj.org)). Her office has a number of trained advocates who can be of support throughout the process of healing. Sister Marilyn will present the matter to the Diocesan Allegation Review Board, which determines whether or not an investigation of the accusation needs to proceed. That Board is comprised of qualified lay women and men, who listen and advise the Bishop as to the proper course of action in response to each situation.

Should such an investigation show sufficient evidence that abuse has occurred, the Diocese is willing to assist with the cost of counseling and, in some cases, will offer financial compensation. The amount of such compensation will depend on the circumstances and severity of the abuse. Unfortunately, our financial resources are limited and an investigation of alleged incidences from the distant past is often quite difficult. Nevertheless, we are committed to respond appropriately to the degree that we are able.

It should be noted that this offer applies only to individuals who enter into our diocesan process, which is specifically designed to avoid the need for litigation. We do not intend to resolve a claim simply to avoid litigation.

We trust that this diocesan process will allow individuals to reach a resolution with the Church in a non-adversarial atmosphere. It is my wish and our responsibility to allow this difficult experience to make of us a more authentic Church. We now need to be about that task. Assisting those whom we may have yet neglected is a part of that task.