



LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

A letter from Bishop Shelton J. Fabre



To the people of God in the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux:

I write to you today because I care for you, and because your faith in Jesus Christ is important to me. I write to you today because you are an important part of the Body of Christ, the Church. For these reasons in particular, I write to you today in response to the scandal of child sexual abuse by clergy.

Some of you may be familiar with all that has occurred during the second half of 2018 with regard to the Church's ongoing challenge of addressing the evil and sin of sexual abuse. It would be understandable if you are experiencing any number of emotions, including a distrust of Church leaders. I pray that you will receive this letter, and all that accompanies it, as a sign that I am doing everything I can to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to accompany victims and their families on the journey toward greater peace and healing, to be a part of the remedy of the evil that has afflicted the Church, and to hopefully assist you in working toward renewed trust in the leaders of the Church.

I pray that as you read the contents of my reflections, you are compelled to join me in ongoing prayer for the healing of victims and their families, as well as for the renewal of the Church.

WHY I AM WRITING THIS LETTER. I am writing to you today because I feel this is a landmark moment in the history of Catholicism in the United States. These challenging times for the Church have been compounded by our seeming inability as bishops to effectively communicate with millions of American Catholics. In the perceived silence, many Catholics have felt abandoned. Some of you may feel as if the evening news or social media are the only voices speaking to the issues. I write to you today with hopes that this information will shine light in a disturbingly dark chapter in the Church's history.

I want to begin by apologizing for the egregious sins that have taken place. Let me be clear: the sexual abuse of a child by anyone is abhorrent, sinful and evil, and even worse when perpetrated by the clergy that is vested with the sacred trust of the children of God. Furthermore, any attempt to cover up these sins is even more disturbing. I again apologize to all who have been harmed by action and inaction on the part of the leaders of the Church.

Carl Bloch, *The Agony in the Garden*, 1873



WE ARE ALL AFFECTED. I know the darkness of the abuse scandal has affected us all. I know that some of us are angry. I understand that some of us are hurting, or ashamed, or just worn down. I suspect that some of us are disillusioned, discouraged, and doubting. It is unacceptable that child sexual abuse could ever find its way into the Church. It is even more unimaginable that it would be dismissed or covered up. I do not presume to know how you, who are reading this letter, are feeling or have felt. However, it is understandable if the lay faithful feel sick or appalled at all that has occurred.

In these past few months, I myself have felt a roller coaster of emotion in response to these challenges, this darkness, in the Church. I have been angry, confused, and exhausted. I have prayed through a myriad of emotions in the midst of this trial. It is there, in prayer, that I have found the hope that can only come from God, the light that shines in the darkness.

Deep within my priestly heart, I also ache for my brother priests who stand daily in service to God and his people and who work tirelessly with integrity to be a light for the world. I understand if they have grown exhausted by the ongoing struggle with this sin and evil in the Church.

TO VICTIMS AND THEIR FAMILIES. It is with deep respect and profound reverence that I humbly address the victims and families of sexual abuse by members of the clergy. What victims endured was evil and what they and their families have faced is tragic. It is understandable if victims and their families feel both angry and abandoned. It is understandable if they mistrust the leadership of the Church because of the response of Church leaders to the evil of sexual abuse in the Church. The lifelong process of healing that is necessary after enduring child sexual abuse is a road marked with struggle, yet I pray that healing is received.

I am fully aware the words “I’m sorry” nowhere come close to the depth of pain that is a result of what you have endured. Knowing this however, I feel as if the only authentic place to start is by apologizing on behalf of any cleric who has sinned and violated the innocence of any child. I apologize if victims of sexual abuse and their families ever felt shunned by the Church or if any bishop at any time failed to listen to them. I apologize to all who have been harmed by these actions and inaction. With deep personal grief in my own heart, I express that I am sorry.

I acknowledge the far-reaching trauma of sexual abuse. I acknowledge the deep pain that has been inflicted and how it affects not only victims, but their families and friends as well. While there are no words that can possibly take away the pain, I also realize that silence speaks something as well. There is a grief in my heart because of what has happened. I grieve that you are hurting. I grieve that this depth of sin has gripped the Church. I grieve because I cannot take away that pain. When I realize the full weight of what has happened, I grieve. There, I know that God grieves. I am deeply sorry, I am so deeply sorry.

To victims and their families, I humbly and boldly invite you not to give up on God. The Gospel of John reminds us that Jesus Christ is “the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:4-5). In those moments where you are angry with the Church or those who hurt you, God will not abandon you. In fact, in those moments he too hurts, he too grieves. In the pain the Lord seeks only to bring healing and comfort, and if we can ever assist him in that process it is our desire to help you and walk with you.



WE ARE HERE TO HELP. Our Victims' Assistance Coordinator is Sister Carmelita Centanni, M.S.C., Ph.D. Sister Carmelita is a religious Sister of the Marianites of Holy Cross. Sister Carmelita is a Licensed Clinical Psychologist. Before joining the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux, she served in the Archdiocese of New Orleans where she also served as the Victims' Assistance Coordinator. Sister Carmelita has over 30 years of counseling experience, as well as 16 years as a Victims' Assistance Coordinator. You may reach Sister Carmelita directly at 985.850.3172 or by email at ccentanni@htdiocese.org.

If you have been a victim of child sexual abuse by a priest, I, with great reverence, say to you now: The door is open. We invite you to come forward. Sister Carmelita is here to assist you. I, as your bishop, am here to assist you. We are committed, now more than ever, to walking with you toward healing.

REPORTING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE. If you have reasonable cause to suspect that a child is being or has been abused by anyone, please first contact the civil authorities by calling the Louisiana Child Abuse Hotline at 855.452.5437. If you suspect that the abuser is a priest, deacon or member of Church personnel, after calling civil authorities please also call Sister Carmelita at 985.850.3172. You may also call the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux Outreach Line at 985.873.0026.

IN THE EVENT OF AN ALLEGATION. What happens today in the event of an allegation of child sexual abuse? Let me be clear regarding our process in the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux. Law enforcement is notified when an allegation of sexual abuse of a minor is received by the Diocese. Law enforcement investigations proceed independently of Church proceedings, and any determination of criminal offense is at the sole discretion of law enforcement.

The Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux fully cooperates with law enforcement personnel. If any concerns are revealed during investigation by the Diocese or law enforcement authorities, the priest is immediately removed from ministry.

DIOCESAN LAY REVIEW BOARD. Allegations are brought to the Diocesan Lay Review Board. On June 14, 2002, the USCCB (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops) approved the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*. The *Charter* addresses the Church's commitment to deal appropriately and effectively with cases of sexual abuse of minors by clergy. To assist bishops, the *Charter* requires each diocese to have a Lay Review Board which functions as a confidential consultative body to the bishop helping him respond with integrity to allegations of sexual abuse by clergy.

Our Diocesan Lay Review Board is intentionally comprised of leaders with backgrounds in law enforcement, legal, medical, and social services. Our current board collectively represents over 200 years of professional expertise. The very first Review Board in Houma-Thibodaux was convened in 1996, well before the mandate of the *Charter* in 2002. It is the Diocesan Lay Review Board, not the bishop, who determines if the allegation is credible. The Diocesan Lay Review Board then makes a recommendation to the bishop based on their discussion regarding the allegation. If at the conclusion of the investigative process the allegation is deemed credible, the priest will remain out of ministry and the results are forwarded to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at the Vatican.



SAFEGUARDING OUR YOUTH. In the 2002 *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, the Catholic Church affirmed its commitment to creating a safe environment within the Church for children and youth. In doing so, the Church established what is commonly known as our “Safe Environment,” program, i.e. norms and policies responsible for implementing a full response to the *Charter*.

Since 2002, all persons in positions of trust who have ongoing contact with children and young people are required to participate regularly in criminal background checks and ongoing training culminating in their adherence to a Safe Environment code of conduct. This includes all priests, deacons, and any diocesan employees, paid personnel and volunteers. Training for all adults who work with children consists of:

- Appropriate boundaries and modes of interaction with children and youth
- Signs an adult may see in a child who is abused
- Signs an adult may see in a person who abuses children
- What actions an adult should take when they believe child abuse of any kind may be occurring

A training program for children includes age appropriate materials pertaining to personal safety and what to do if they are harmed.

As of January 2019, we have over 4,845 people certified and trained in Safe Environment. Every priest is trained in Safe Environment practices. I cannot undo the egregious mistakes of the past; however, I can assure you that we are doing everything in our power to prevent the mistakes of the past from happening again.

As you may be aware, the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux has joined a number of dioceses around the country in publishing the names of clergy with a credible allegation of abuse made against them. It was completely voluntary on our part to release the names of priests who served in the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux and who have had a credible allegation of child sexual abuse made against them during their service here. I chose to release the names because I believed it was the right thing to do. I pray that the release of these names is an indication to the people of the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux that we are committed to doing all we can to regain trust.

Let me explain the process that was used to determine this release of names. The 2002 *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* outlines the norms and policies that must be followed regarding the sexual abuse of a minor. The *Charter* not only defines what sexual abuse is, but in so doing, outlines what matters must be brought before the Diocesan Lay Review Board. During the fall of 2018, a team of 10 diocesan officials reviewed every file of any priest who ever served within the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux since our beginning in June 1977. Any matter of concern regarding an allegation of the sexual abuse of a child was brought to our Diocesan Lay Review Board.

As bishop, I made an intentional decision to give the Diocesan Lay Review Board the authority to determine whether the allegations had evidence of credibility and were substantiated. In so doing, the Diocesan Lay Review Board determined and recommended to me the list of the names that have been published.



As mentioned earlier, our Diocesan Lay Review Board is comprised of leaders with over 200 years of expertise in law enforcement, legal and medical professions, and social services. Our current board is chaired by Judge Morris Lottinger, Jr., retired chief judge of the Louisiana First Circuit Court of Appeal. He served on the court from 1975 to 1998. The court has both civil and criminal jurisdiction in Terrebonne, Lafourche and St. Mary parishes as well as thirteen other parishes. The names of the remaining six members of the Diocesan Lay Review Board remain confidential.

Names of priests of the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux and those who served here from other dioceses or religious communities who had a credible allegation of child sexual abuse made against them while serving here in the diocese may be found on our diocesan website: htdiocese.org/lightinthedarkness. Be assured that no priest in current active ministry in the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux is on this list.

On this webpage, you will also find the text of this Pastoral Letter and other resources regarding this issue, including videos for adults, parents and youth.

BEING LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS. Unfortunately, the Catholic Church has seen scandal before. The same Catholic Church that has given the world all that is beautiful in our 2,000 year history has also shared with the world regrettable chapters within that history. Yet, with every scandal that has plagued our history, there has been a consistent remedy: the light of striving for radical holiness. In every dark corner of history, saints have arisen to be a light that shines in the darkness: Augustine, Francis and Ignatius, as well as Catherine, Thérèse and Mother Theresa, to name a few. Whenever things seem darkest, God convicts people to live their lives with holiness. With you today I recommit to my own pursuit of holiness.

The First Letter of John 1:5-7 states: “Now this is the message that we have heard from him and proclaim to you: God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say, ‘We have fellowship with him,’ while we continue to walk in darkness, we lie and do not act in truth. But if we walk in the light as he is in the light, then we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of his Son Jesus cleanses us from all sin.” Sexual abuse is sinful and is unacceptable. I pledge to you to continue to join with others and to make every effort to rid the Church of this evil. The Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux will always cooperate with law enforcement. I will continue my ongoing collaboration with our Diocesan Lay Review Board. We will strive to always be in compliance with the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*.

Atoning for the sins of the past requires both repentance and reconciliation. With reverent humility, I admit that there is nothing any bishop can do to rewrite history and remove the wound of abuse. However, the Church can, and must, do all she can do in her power to help those who have been abused by priests take steps forward toward healing. We will focus on doing what we can to assist victims and their families to progress on the journey of healing.

With the negative publicity that has plagued the evening news and the endless pages of social media, I want to affirm the reality that there are many good and outstanding members of the clergy serving across our nation. Here in our own diocese we have really good priests, men whom I trust and find it a joy to stand with shoulder to shoulder in the ministry of service. The priests in our diocese each does his best to serve you well.



I am also encouraged with the men who said “yes” to the call and are in the seminary. I want to do all that I can to make sure the future of the priesthood is filled with men who long to be beacons of light in the darkness. We will work for the renewal of the priesthood, with both those ordained and those in formation.

TO MY BROTHER PRIESTS. While many people may be struggling with all that is happening on a national scale, many people are looking to their local pastor and priest for hope. Let me therefore address our priests. My brothers, let us not underestimate the opportunity that is before us. However, let us be reminded of the words of Pope Paul VI: “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.’ ... It is therefore primarily by her conduct and by her life that the Church will evangelize the world, in other words, by her living witness of fidelity to the Lord Jesus” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* no. 41). You and I were ordained to lead people at this time in the history of the Church. Now more than ever, people are looking for examples of holiness.

HEARING YOUR VOICE. My purpose in writing this letter was for you to hear my voice. However, I want to avail myself to you so that I may hear yours. From now until Ash Wednesday, I am organizing regional gatherings in six key geographic centers of our diocese: Houma, Thibodaux, Morgan City, Central Lafourche, South Lafourche, and South Terrebonne. The dates, times and locations of the upcoming gatherings may be found online on our diocesan website: hdiocese.org/listen. I want to listen to you so that we may together follow the light in the darkness to Jesus Christ, the Light of the World.

JESUS CHRIST, LIGHT OF THE WORLD. As I release this letter on Friday, January 11, 2019, I am aware that now, more than ever, we need light to shine in the darkness. My heart is comforted by the Feast celebrated this past Sunday, January 6, namely the Feast of the Epiphany. The Feast of the Epiphany has much to teach us about where to go and what to do with all that is in our hearts.

The Gospel reading this past Sunday was Matthew 2:1-12. It is the story of the magi, often referred to as “wise men.” As you may be aware, the Bible never uses the language of “wise men” with regard to these travelers from the East who visited the Christ child. They are called “wise” not because of what the Bible says about them, but because of what the Bible shows them doing. God spoke through the sign of the star. And when God speaks, wise men listen. The magi are “wise men” because they listened to God.

These wise magi were guided on their journey by a star. The star was a light, a sign that they followed. These magi kept their eyes on a light that shined in the darkness, and that light led them to the true Light of the World, Jesus Christ.

We celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany for several reasons. One of the things that God reminds us of through this Feast is that he longs to guide us through the darkness. Now, more than ever, we need light in the darkness. Now, more than ever, we all need to keep our eyes on God as he promises to guide us through the darkness, a darkness that we have all seen in these past few months.



We need light more than ever. As I look back on the history of the Catholic Church, I acknowledge there have been times before where the darkness has sought to steal the light of hope. I acknowledge that, with all that we have seen in these past few months, there may be a temptation to lose hope. However, I am a man of hope and I challenge us all, like the “wise men,” to follow the light in the darkness, and then to be that light in the darkness to one another.

As your bishop, I am inspired by the fidelity that defines the good people of the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux. Yes, you inspire me. When I, like the magi who followed the star, am looking for something that can eventually lead me to Jesus, I often find that sign in you. The “practical holiness” of so many of our lay faithful is a sign for the world, and the world has never needed your sign as much as now.

The magi trusted God. They, perhaps against many of the doubting voices around them, set out on a long journey to follow a sign that they were convinced would lead them to a savior. The magi were learned men who made a decision that their search for God was more important than anything else. I can only speculate that on their journey the light that they followed stood in stark contrast to the amount of darkness that surrounded it. However, these faithful were unwavering on their pursuit of the true Light of the World: Jesus Christ.

My dear brothers and sisters, we need you. I need you. As your bishop, I am asking the lay faithful of our diocese to follow God as passionately and as intently as the “wise men” did. Do not give up. In any season of the Church that history paints as dark, light has arisen through the lives of the saints. Holiness is always an answer to the challenges of the day. I know that each of us has our challenges and struggles; however, just as God led the magi, God is leading us now. God is the light that is leading us through the darkness. May we follow him more courageously than ever and find the very same savior that the magi found at the culmination of their journey.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Rev. Shelton J. Fabre
Bishop of the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux
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