

# **A Report on the History of Sexual Abuse of Minors in the Diocese of Brownsville**

*Prepared by the Office of the Chancellor*

## **Introduction:**

The Diocese of Brownsville was established on July 10, 1965 when Pope Paul VI separated the counties of Cameron, Willacy, Hidalgo and Starr from the territory of the Diocese of Corpus Christi.

Bishop Raymundo J. Peña, was installed as the fifth bishop of the Diocese of Brownsville on August 6, 1995. A few months ago he instructed the Office of the Chancellor to study the history of sexual abuse of minors by priests in the Diocese.

More recently he called for the results of this study be shared with the people of the Diocese of Brownsville, that they, too, may know what has been learned. He also expressed his desire that the people be informed of all that the Church is doing to prevent any recurrence of abuse.

## **Historical Perspective:**

After a thorough investigation of all Diocesan priest personnel files dating back to 1965, there is reasonable cause to believe that over the past 38 years seven priests out of approximately 246 priests who served in the diocese sexually abused one or more minors.

Based on what is known today, allegations against those priests originated from 12 persons. All seven priests were permanently removed from active ministry.

The number of priest offenders by decade is as follows:

<u>Decade</u>	<u># of Priest Offenders</u>
1965-1975	3
1976-1985	2
1986-1995	1
1996-present	1

## **Procedures for responding:**

The procedures for responding to allegations of sexual abuse of minors by priests have changed over the years in response to the increasing level of awareness of the damage done by the misconduct.

In the 1950's and 1960's sexual misconduct was perceived as a spiritual matter, a sin for confession with a penance to be performed with sincere contrition and a firm purpose of amendment. There was always a goal of forgiveness and redemption. The priest was sent for treatment at a residential facility or required to receive psychological counseling. Often the recommendation from the mental health professionals was that the priest could safely be returned to ministry with the appropriate monitoring and psychological and spiritual support.

The prevalence and severity of the problem of sexual abuse of minors reached a new level of awareness in the late 1980s. In a 1994 document called *Restoring Trust*, the United States Catholic bishops set some guidelines regarding the sexual abuse of minors by priests. In response to that document, The Diocese of Brownsville, like many other dioceses, formed a committee and established policies to address this problem. From December 1994 through May 1995 a number of orientation and training sessions were held throughout the diocese. The policies governed standards of behavior, and procedures for responding to allegations of sexual misconduct with minors.

In 1996, Bishop Peña updated the policies, which were again updated and revised this year in order to bring them into conformity with the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, established by the U.S. Catholic bishops in 2002. The procedures outlined in section VII of the diocese's new *Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines for Ethical and Responsible Conduct in Ministry*, emphasize that any suspected misconduct with minors by church personnel should be reported immediately.

Suspected misconduct with minors by a priest, deacon, or religious should be reported directly to the Bishop or Vicar General at (956) 784-5067 or (956) 542-2501. Letters to the Vicar General or Bishop should be sent to P.O.Box 2279, Brownsville, TX 78522-2279. Suspected misconduct with minors by a lay church employee or volunteer should be reported to the pastor of the parish, the principal of the school, or the head of the Catholic institution in question. Upon request, a form for a *Confidential Notice of Concern* may be obtained from the local pastor, school principal, institution head, or diocese, or it may be downloaded from the official website of the Brownsville Diocese ([www.cdob.org](http://www.cdob.org)).

In accordance with Texas law, any person who has cause to believe a minor may have been or is being abused in any way must report his or her suspicions to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, which maintains a 24-hour child abuse hotline at 1-800-252-5400. Reports may be made confidentially or anonymously.

**Finances:**

Financial information on costs associated with the abuse of minors is not available for the years prior to 1978. From 1978 to the present, the following expenditures were made:

Counseling for victims	\$250,000
Counseling for priests	\$41,300
Legal fees	\$20,000
Settlements with victims	\$120,000

No money has been expended for sexual abuse cases from parish assessments or from the sale of real estate. The majority of the monies expended have been paid by the diocese's insurance.

The expenditures listed do not include the recent settlement, which must be kept confidential at the victim's request.

**The Present:**

In addition to adopting its new *Policies, Procedures and Guidelines for the Ethical and Responsible Conduct in Ministry*, the Diocese of Brownsville has also introduced a safe environment program of education and prevention of child sexual abuse called *Protecting God's Children*. All clergy, religious, lay employees, and volunteers who have regular contact with minors are required to participate in the training, which also includes an orientation on the *Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines for Ethical and Responsible Conduct in Ministry*. Following the orientation, each participant is required to sign a statement that he or she has read and agrees to abide by the diocese's Code of Ethics.

In October 2002, 40 volunteers completed a two-day train-the-trainer session for *Protecting God's Children* in order to become competent to provide the training throughout the diocese. Training sessions at parishes started in September 2003. To date more than 1,500 people have completed the workshop.

This program focuses on...

- ❑ Working together as a Catholic Community to create a safer world for our children;
- ❑ Knowing the warning signs of a potential abuser in order to protect children;
- ❑ Carefully screening everyone who works with our children;
- ❑ Protecting our children by closely monitoring all programs;
- ❑ Being aware of what is happening in the lives of our own children;
- ❑ Communicating when we have concerns about inappropriate behavior of suspected abuse.

While the diocese already carried out criminal background checks of anyone applying for employment with the Church, it now requires the same for all volunteers who have regular contact with minors or vulnerable adults. Background checks of all clergy and religious currently serving in the diocese have also been completed and one will be required of any new priest, deacon, or religious coming into the diocese.

In June 2002, Bishop Peña appointed Mr. Walter Lukaszek as the Victims Assistance Coordinator for the Diocese of Brownsville, whose responsibility is to coordinate assistance for the immediate pastoral care to persons who have been victims of sexual abuse or who have been directly hurt by allegations or incidents of serious misconduct. Presently counseling is being provided for two such individuals.

The Review Board for the Protection of God's People functions as a confidential consultative body for the bishop as stipulated in the Charter. The board includes one priest and four lay people, two women and two men (a licensed legal expert, two licensed experts in therapy and psychiatry, and a mother). Members of the review board will remain confidential. The members consider their work to be the equivalent of that of a grand jury, and some have indicated that keeping their names confidential is an essential condition for their serving on the board.

The diocese was visited this past July by a team from the Gavin Group, a Boston-based independent firm, which had been commissioned by the National Review Board established by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to conduct an audit of all dioceses in the United States. The diocese was evaluated for its compliance with the articles of *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*. The audit team reviewed the diocese's policies, practices and clergy personnel files. The full report is scheduled to be released by the National Review Board at a later date; however, the diocese has received a letter indicating that it is in full compliance.

The diocese also participated in a national study carried out by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, a part of the University System of New York. The study was commissioned by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to determine the nature and scope of the problem of sexual abuse of children and young people by clergy within the Catholic Church in the United States. The expected date of the release of the results of the study is in late January or early February. It is the hope of the U.S. Bishops that the knowledge gained from the study will help them better understand the root causes of the problem of sexual abuse of minors, and identify any further action they must take.