



DIOCESE OF VENICE IN FLORIDA
OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

January 17, 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In these first weeks of the New Year, I extend my greetings with the prayer that 2017 will be filled with Our Lord's Blessings for you and your family. My thoughts and pastoral concern remain with you, the Faithful of Saint Isabel Parish.

This letter further addresses the circumstances for which Father Christopher Senk was placed on paid administrative leave. This action has been upsetting to some parishioners and I am sure many are distressed that such measures were needed. However, with all compassion, serious allegations were made having to do with a vulnerable elderly parishioner of Saint Isabel Parish. Claims of exploitation were made to the Diocese of Venice by family members when they became genuinely concerned that Father Senk would not stop accepting gifts as asked. That Father Senk continued to accept gifts was particularly upsetting to the family, after it was made clear that the woman's dementia was steadily progressing, for which there is ample evidence.

The allegations were also the subject of a criminal investigation. While not resulting in prosecution, the lengthy two-year investigation uncovered much evidence and investigators strongly asserted that there were violations of the Code of Pastoral Conduct of the Diocese. Therefore, it is essential that the Diocese examine the evidence in light of the pastoral obligations of Father Senk, even though Father denies the allegations.

It ought to be understood that Father Senk, in his role as your Pastor, acts in the name of the Church and on behalf of the Diocese of Venice. Therefore, the Diocese is called upon to be vigilant in assuring the integrity of his pastoral ministry. In addition, as it does with all priests, the Diocese necessarily urges Father Senk to conform his priestly ministry to the Gospel ideals. It is these ideals that Pope Francis frequently emphasizes.

Some have questioned the time the Diocese has taken to conduct its deliberations. In answer to these questions, it must be said that much more is known about this case than has been reported in the media or shared by the parties. The Diocese is responsible for looking at all the facts as it deliberates; it cannot select a few facts here- and-there in a rush to judgment, as some have clearly done. It should be understood that full respect is being shown to the interests of all involved. Thus, when Father Senk requested extra time to formulate his response, it was granted. Only on December 3, 2016 was the response of Father Senk received. The Diocese could not hastily draw conclusions about the complex issues in this case; rather it needed to be careful and diligent in evaluating the facts.

Father Senk has now had the opportunity, with his appointed canon law advocate, to review the evidence and respond to the allegations made. The Diocese also undertook the aforementioned deliberation of the facts. In assessing the evidence obtained from the criminal investigation, it was noted that there are

other issues which needed to be taken under advisement in formulating a pastoral response. Therefore, after careful consultation with priests and canonical experts, it has been recommended that the case involving Father Senk and his pastoral conduct needs to be addressed by a formal canonical procedure.

Some parishioners have expressed in the media and elsewhere that the Diocese is being unfair in its treatment of Father Senk. This has been heard and carefully considered by me and those whom I consulted. It seems apparent that for some almost any outcome will be perceived as biased against Father Senk. Therefore, to avoid any suggestion of unfairness or perceived bias, the Diocese will refer this case to the neutral forum of the Apostolic See in Rome.

As Bishop, if I failed to seriously address allegations related to abuse of a vulnerable adult, I would be remiss in my obligations as your Shepherd. The Church has a primary duty to protect the vulnerable and the weak. The frailest among us depend on the Church for spiritual care and true respect for their human dignity.

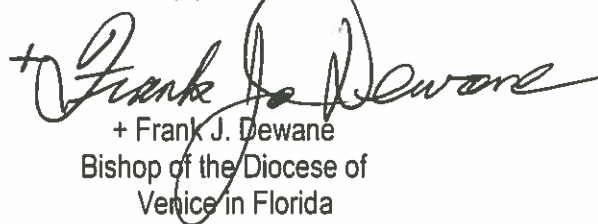
You are asked to appreciate that this case is also not easy for me. My interest is the pastoral care of the Faithful in the Parish and it is never pleasant to correct a priest. However, it is my obligation to guard the Faithful entrusted to my care, even when the one accused of doing harm is a priest.

Please be assured that Father Senk continues to receive the financial support and health and pension benefits. Further, I ask you to join me in praying for him and his spiritual well-being. Father Chris is a priest of the Diocese of Venice and my special solicitude is with him, even as he is asked to answer for his actions.

It has been my goal to respond to your letters and emails, whenever possible. Understand that I continue to be limited in what I can say during any ongoing canonical process. The Diocese makes every effort to protect the good name and reputation of all involved; others are asked to do the same.

Allow me to express my gratitude for your understanding to date and your patience as this difficult situation awaits resolution. My prayer is that God will watch over the Faithful of Saint Isabel Parish. You and your family are assured of my remembrance in prayer and please pray for me.

Sincerely yours in Christ,


+ Frank J. Dewane
Bishop of the Diocese of
Venice in Florida

FJD/bh