



Catholic Church of Eastern Montana

DIOCESE OF GREAT FALLS-BILLINGS

Founded 1904

Live the Gospel. Bring Light to the World

May 20, 2018

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

There is a song by John Michael Talbot commonly sung in churches:

We are one body, one body in Christ,
And we do not stand alone.
We are one body, one body in Christ,
And he came that we might have life.

The refrain provides a strong reminder of what it means to be a member of the Church. Membership involves much more than being a part of an institutional entity defined by civil and canonical statutes. It involves discipleship and an identity as a constituent part of the body of Christ. It is no wonder that St. Paul used the image of a human body to describe the Christian community at Corinth: "The body is one and has many members, but all the members, many though they are, are one body: and so it is with Christ" (1 Cor. 12:12). St. Paul goes on to describe how the various parts of the body are connected to each other, each having its own importance. He concludes: "If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members share its joy. You then, are the body of Christ" (1 Cor. 12:26-27).

As the song refrain proclaims, "We are one body, one body in Christ." Similarly, there are certain elements that provide structure for a diocese (i.e., the local Church), but at its deepest reality, local churches are not simple legal entities or federations of parishes. They are a family of believers, a people of God sharing an intimate communion with each other which is celebrated and expressed in the Eucharist.

On the weekend of April 28-29, 2018, I asked all pastors to provide a copy of a statement regarding the law suits filed against the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings. The suits contained eighty-six claims by individuals who asserted that they were sexually abused as minors by priests, religious and a lay person serving on behalf of the Diocese. My statement announced a tentative settlement by which a total of \$20 million dollars would be paid to these 86 claimants. This would also include several non-monetary elements. To be sure, the settlement is yet tentative and filled with challenges, but now a pathway has been cleared to fully resolve the suits and begin to move forward as a diocese. Claimants attorneys, diocesan attorneys and diocesan staff have been working to reach a final agreement. A recent hearing with Federal Bankruptcy Judge Papas included representation of those involved.

During the six plus years since the first suit was filed, I have asserted two basic responsibilities as bishop of the Diocese. The first is to be accountable to those who suffered sexual abuse when they were minors by a person serving on behalf of the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings. That a priest, a religious or a lay minister would sexually abuse a child is inexcusable and a crime. I express deep regret and sorrow to anyone who was abused by a representative of the Diocese and ask for forgiveness. I have listened to many individuals and have found their accounts of abuse compelling. No child should ever be harmed in such a way and especially by a figure serving on behalf of the Church. Sexual abuse of a minor is a horrendous sin. Though events may have occurred many years ago, the pain and hurt from abuse lingers on for years. The settlement provides a degree of accountability to those who were victimized.

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

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The second responsibility is to the present and future generations of the Diocese and its parishes. In my judgment, it would be unfair and unjust to present and future generations to totally deplete the resources of both the Diocese and its parishes and be unable to function as the Catholic Church of Eastern Montana. The amount established by the tentative settlement already will seriously hamper my ability as bishop as well as my Chancery to provide pastoral and administrative services. There are not sufficient funds from financial assets solely held by the Corporation of the Roman Catholic Bishop of Great Falls to meet the settlement amount. Savings of strictly diocesan financial assets essentially will be used, but these assets cannot cover the total amount required to meet the settlement. As bishop, I have committed all diocesan savings toward funding the settlement as well as all diocesan excess property of value which is not currently being used for ministry. Claimants attorneys had asserted that almost \$100 million in parish property (assessed value) and parish cash savings should be at risk and used to compensate victims. The Diocese has disagreed with this assertion. In any case, all parish property and parish savings are protected as well as parish financial assets located in the Catholic Foundation of Eastern Montana.

At the same time, and in some form, parishes are being asked to contribute to the settlement. There have been numerous meetings with pastors and various diocesan councils to determine how to accomplish this. Our diocesan insurance carrier will contribute a substantial amount to the settlement. There are also several additional funding sources who have agreed to contribute to the settlement. Because of the immediate need to provide cash to finalize the settlement, some diocesan real properties have been left in abeyance.

What is clear is that remaining within Chapter 11 Bankruptcy status, with many years ahead of litigating issues such as parish assets or facing several decades of trials, would result in a much higher cost to the Diocese and its parishes. It would also provide little in the way of accountability to those who deserve it.

As I mentioned, there will be a non-monetary element to the settlement. Most of the requirements for this have been in place in the Diocese for over a decade and a half. The Safe Environment Program will continue to be maintained vigilantly. As has been the case for decades, any allegation is addressed quickly and according to the Child Protection Policy that has been in place for these years. Those serving on behalf of the Diocese and of any of its parishes or schools, must submit to a criminal background check, undergo Safe Environment Training and agree to follow the Code of Conduct. These practices will be reviewed to assure compliance.

I envision the finalization of the settlement to be accomplished by August. Currently, a final hearing is set for August 14, 2018. Once there is a final resolution, the Diocese and its parishes will be able to move forward, restoring financial resources but most importantly rebuilding trust.

There is a good deal of work yet to do and all is not complete. I offer thanks to the various parties who through their time and efforts have helped to resolve the suits. There have understandably been occasions that involved a good deal of tension, but there has also been a general desire by all to reach a solution.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Michael W. Warfel". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "M" and a cross at the end.

Michael W. Warfel
Bishop of Great Falls-Billings