

NEWS

Bishop saddened by priests' abuse of children

WASHINGTON (CNS) — The president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has expressed "profound sorrow" for the sexual abuse of children by priests and said the harm they have caused is "immeasurable."

In a two-page statement issued Feb. 19 on behalf of all the nation's bishops, Bishop Wilton D. Gregory of Belleville, Ill., said such abuse "is a reality against which we must be ceaselessly on guard."

Sexual abuse of minors by priests and the way the church handles the issue were a topic of daily media reports in New England in the month preceding Bishop Gregory's statement.

John Geoghan, a former Boston priest defrocked in 1998, was convicted in mid-January of indecent assault on a child 10 years ago and faced another trial on charges of raping a child while he was a priest.

Amid heavy media criticism, Cardinal Bernard F. Law of Boston acknowledged "tragically incorrect" judgments in giving Geoghan pastoral assignments before he removed the alleged molester from all ministry in 1994.

Cardinal Law instituted a new "zero-tolerance" policy under which no priest known to have ever sexually molested a

minor can hold any church job in the archdiocese.

Bishop Gregory — who had to deal with a similar scandal involving several child-molesting priests in Belleville when he was appointed bishop there in 1993 — said the new attention to the issue "gives me the opportunity to renew the promise of our bishops that we will continue to take all the steps necessary to protect our youth from this kind of abuse in society and in the church."

Bishop Gregory's statement and other information on church policies and efforts to combat sexual abuse of minors have been placed on the official Web site of the bishops' conference at www.usccb.org.

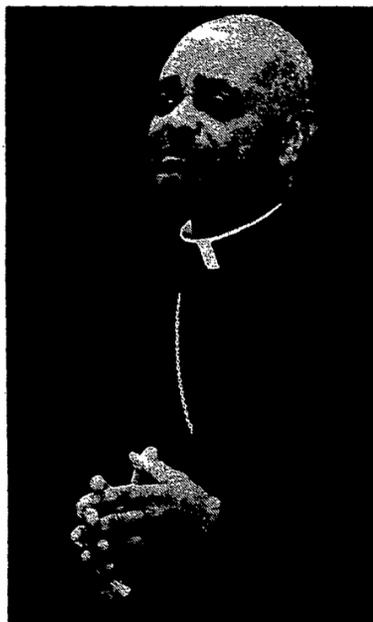
The full text of his statement follows:

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In recent weeks our attention has again been turned to the issue of sexual abuse of minors by priests. Though the renewed focus on this issue is due largely to cases of priest abusers that were not dealt with appropriately in the past, it gives me the occasion as a pastor and a teacher of faith and morals to express, on behalf of all of the bishops, our profound sorrow that some of our priests were responsible for this abuse under our watch. We understand that your children are your most precious gift. They are our children as well, and we continue to apologize to the victims and to their parents and their loved ones for this failure in our pastoral responsibilities.

The attention to this issue also gives me the opportunity to renew the promise of our bishops that we will continue to take all the steps necessary to protect our youth from this kind of abuse in society and in the church. While we still have much for which we need to be forgiven — and much to learn — I am very heartened by the professionals who work with both victims and abusers who encourage us in this work because, they tell us, there is not another institution in the United States that is doing more to understand and address the horror of sexual abuse of minors.

As a church, we have met with those who are victims of sexual abuse by priests. We have heard their sorrow, confusion, anger and fear. We have tried to reach out



Martin Lueders/CNS
In a Feb. 19 statement Bishop Wilton D. Gregory of Belleville, Ill., expressed "profound sorrow" on behalf of the U.S. bishops for the abuse of children by priests under their watch. Bishop Gregory is president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

pastorally and sensitively not only to victims of this outrageous behavior, but to their families and the communities devastated by this crime. We have confronted priests accused of abuse and removed them from public ministry.

Over the past two decades, the bishops of the United States have worked diligently to learn all we can about sexual abuse. Our conference has encouraged the development of policies in every diocese to address this issue. Bishops have developed procedures whereby priests moving from one diocese to another must have certification of their good standing. Bishops have also revised seminary screening and have mandated in-service programs for priests, teachers, parish ministers and volunteers to emphasize their responsibility to protect the innocent and vulnerable from such abuse. Dio-

ceses have implemented programs to ensure safe environments in parishes and schools. While we have made some tragic mistakes, we have attempted to be as honest and open about these cases as we can, especially in following the law on these matters and cooperating with civil authorities. We remain committed to seeing these initiatives implemented fully, because the church must be a place of refuge and security, not a place of denial and distress. Sadly, we are faced with the fact that evil does harm the innocent, something which human life has faced since the beginning of time. This is a reality against which we must be ceaselessly on guard.

I want to say a word about the more than 40,000 wonderful priests in our country who get up every morning to give their lives in full service to the church as witnesses to Jesus Christ in our midst. I am very saddened that the crimes of a few have cast a shadow over the grace-filled and necessary work that they do day in and day out for society and for the church. The priesthood is a unique treasure of our church, and I give you my assurance that we are doing everything to ensure that we have worthy and healthy candidates for the priesthood and to strengthen the many priests who faithfully fulfill their ministry on behalf of all of us.

While we deplore the sexual abuse of young people, especially that committed by a cleric, we are confident that the numbers of priests involved in such criminal activity are few. The damage, however, has been immeasurable. The toll this phenomenon has taken on our people and our ministry is tremendous. This is a time for Catholic people, bishops, clergy, religious and laity, to resolve anew to work together to assure the safety of our children. These events serve to remind us all that the cost of preventing these terrible misdeeds in the future is a careful watch that cannot and will not be relaxed. We bishops intend to maintain that watch together with and on behalf of our people.

As we pursue this common work for the safety of our children and for the good of society and the church we love, let us continue to remember one another before the Lord in prayer and in charity.

Vatican probes charges against Polish prelate

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — The Vatican said it was looking into accusations of sexual abuse concerning a Polish archbishop who worked for several years at the Vatican at the beginning of Pope John Paul II's pontificate.

Archbishop Juliusz Paetz of Poznan, 67, has denied the accusations brought by seminarians and priests in his archdiocese, according to a report Feb. 23 in the Polish newspaper, *Rzeczpospolita*.

The newspaper said a Vatican commission had visited the archdiocese last November to investigate the allegations and hear testimony, and that Archbishop Paetz had been called to the Vatican for a week of talks in early February.

Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls confirmed Feb. 23 that the Vatican had been informed about details of the case and was "following the matter with great attention and responsibility in order to protect the rights of everyone."

It was the first announced case of alleged clergy sex abuse to be dealt with directly by the Vatican since the Holy See established universal norms on such cases. The norms, formulated last year, require local bishops to report all serious suspicions or allegations of sexual abuse by clergy to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

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