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To the priests and faithful of the Archdiocese of Toronto:

Christ, Our Good Shepherd, is the model for all priests, who are called to be holy servants of Our Risen Lord. These truly are Easter days of hope, and yet they have been painful for all of us Catholics. It seems that not a day has gone by in recent weeks without hearing of Catholic priests who have sexually abused those entrusted to their care, or of the failure of their superiors to deal rightly with that. We should always be thankful when wrongdoing is revealed, for that can lead to renewal, but in the face of this constant criticism, Catholic clergy and lay people alike can feel discouraged, angry, confused, and ashamed.

And so I offer these reflections to you.

We are a Church of more than one billion Catholics worldwide. We rejoice in the faithful witness to Christ given each day by Catholic Christians - laity, clergy, and religious. But when we fail, individually or as a community, we must acknowledge that. There is a good reason why Jesus gave his disciples the Sacrament of Reconciliation as an Easter gift. We all need it.

As I said to the priests of our Archdiocese a few weeks ago at the annual Chrism Mass:

“People expect that one who is consecrated with the holy oil of Chrism, will act in an exemplary manner, and never betray the trust which people know they should be able to place in a Catholic priest. And yet to our shame some have used the awesome gift of the holy priesthood for base personal gratification, betraying the innocent and devastating their lives. When that happens, our first concern must be for those innocent young people who have been abused, to help them overcome their suffering, and to resolve to take whatever steps are needed to be as sure as is possible that this does not happen again. We have all had to learn through failures and mistakes and that is especially true of bishops, who have sometimes failed in their responsibility to act effectively.”

These scandals are dramatic exceptions to the fundamental reality of priestly goodness, for almost all priests serve faithfully, in the imitation of the Good Shepherd, and lay Catholics' daily experience of that service is true consolation in these difficult times. But just one priest gone wrong causes great suffering, and as we hear of evil done by some clergy in our own communities and around the world, we are all filled with dismay. Steady reflection upon this painful reality challenges us to work more effectively to do all that we can to ensure that this evil does not afflict the vulnerable in the future. The reality of abuse is rooted deeply in the fact of fallen humanity, and in the evil that can infect the human heart. It is found throughout society. Though we may never expect to be fully rid of it, we must never cease to try to do so.

Over the past several decades our educational institutions, workplaces, and families have learned more about the devastating impact of abuse. The Catholic Church also has made significant progress, with much of the reform led by then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, today our beloved Pope Benedict XVI. We are all grateful to him for that.

The reports we have heard and read in the media deal largely with incidents from many years ago. There are preventative measures in place now that were not in place in the past, so that today society and our Church community are much safer. In the Archdiocese of Toronto, for more than 20 years we have operated under sound protocols and procedures to deal with any accusation of misconduct, and they have served us well.

Our Archdiocesan “Procedure for Cases of Alleged Misconduct”, was first introduced in 1989. The procedure, which is readily accessible on our website, is transparent and fulfils every obligation of law in Ontario and Canada. It was revised in 1991 and again in 2003, but we need to review it again. I will be asking a qualified group of lay people, recognized as having relevant experience with youth, psychology, legal issues and ethics, to examine carefully whatever we can learn from other groups, and by July 31, 2010, to recommend any ways that our Procedure can be made even more effective.

This fall, with the updated Procedure in place and published, our priests and all those who are engaged in pastoral service in our Archdiocese will discuss more fully how we can best respond to the issue of sexual abuse in the Church and in society.

This is especially a time for all of us to pray deeply, humbly offering to God the Eucharist, Eucharistic adoration, the rosary, and our other daily prayers. Pray first of all for anyone who has suffered violence or abuse, in the Church, in their family, or in society. Pray also for all of us who serve you in any pastoral ministry, that each day we will be faithful to the office entrusted to us.

To the hundreds of priests who so faithfully serve the people of our Archdiocese every day, I give thanks for your loving witness and your inspiring example of pastoral care, in the imitation of Christ the Good Shepherd. I thank the lay faithful of the Archdiocese, whose daily example of Christian discipleship makes the love of our Lord present in our society. The Catholic Church continues to be a beacon of hope for the world as, conscious of human frailty but confident in divine grace, we humbly seek to serve Our Risen Lord faithfully during our pilgrim journey to our lasting home in the heavenly Jerusalem.

May this present experience help all of us to grow in holiness, purer in faith, stronger in hope, and more generous in love.

Thomas Collins
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