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*Pastoral Message of Most Reverend Archbishop Albert LeGatt
Notre-Dame-de-la-Nativité Parish
Somerset, Manitoba
1st Sunday of Advent*

Saturday, November 26, 2011 at 7:30 p.m. and Sunday, November 27, 2011 at 11:00 a.m.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Today, we are beginning the season of Advent, a season where, as we prepare for Christmas, we express once again our hope that the Lord Jesus will come with the peace, justice, healing, mercy and compassion he alone can bring. Called to be awake, alert to his coming amongst us even now, we are also called to hope and to work for a Church and a world where the power of His love reconciles and creates right relationships between all.

As it was stated in your bulletin for the last two Sundays, I have come today to offer a pastoral message to all the people who were affected by the sexual abuse perpetrated by some members of the clergy, abuse that took place in Somerset and in the Mountain region.

You may well be asking why I am addressing this issue, over 20 years after the allegations against certain members of the clergy at the service of the Archdiocese were first brought forward, and that they were suspended from ministry in this diocese.

My answers for this “why” are several. The situation of the instances of sexual abuse perpetrated against several young boys of this parish was first brought to my attention by former pastors of your parish who spoke of the many hurts still present among the victims, their friends, their families and the community as a whole, hurts that still affect the life of the parish.

And most importantly, I heard the stories brought forward by the Committee of Support for the Victims, namely Mr. Omer Boulet, Mrs. Anita Poiron, Mr. Gerry Archambeault and Mrs. Marie Letain, who recounted their efforts to be of help to the victims, especially at the time when those matters were first brought forth but also in the intervening years and even now.

And at this time, I wish to express my deep appreciation to the members of this Committee, now joined by Miss Yvonne Maes, for having listened to, believed, supported and accompanied the victims who brought forward what had happened to them. The Committee members were with these victims as they sought justice for themselves and protection for others in bringing forward criminal charges.

As I listened to all this, and came to know that the sexual abuse had indeed happened against several of the young people of this parish, I was deeply saddened that such pain and hurt had been brought to them by priests who betrayed their pastoral responsibility and the trust placed in them. As pastor, I know that such acts could only have also deeply wounded trust in the Church and even the faith itself of many of the members of this parish and beyond.

In the face of this continuing reality of hurt, I sincerely believe it is important that all walls of silence be broken, that we be able to listen to one another as we seek together what is best for all in terms of true justice and true healing. I pray that the Lord may come and lead us as we go forward to seek justice and healing firstly for the victims but also for this Christian community.

Having said all this, I especially want to say that the reason I have come today to speak to you is especially to reach out to the victims, asking them what it is they might want from the Archdiocese of Saint Boniface.

To the victims, I wish to firstly express, as sincerely as possible, my deep regret for all those ways in which you were so deeply hurt physically, emotionally, spiritually and otherwise by these priests who betrayed the trust you placed in them. You were in no way responsible for what happened to you.

I can only imagine in a small way your feelings of anger, of shame, of sadness, of doubt, of guilt, of humiliation, and of then being hurt again by not being believed and being accused yourselves. You lost so much of what was important to you, your dignity and the security and respect that are the right of every person.

And so, to the victims and to their families, I sincerely apologize for the abuse they suffered at the hands of certain members of the clergy at the service of the Archdiocese, and for suffering the consequences of that abuse over the years. I apologize as well for the failure of the Archdiocese to protect the victims and their families from this abuse, for the failure of some clergy and some persons in the community to believe your story, and so for the failure of the Archdiocese to provide you with adequate support in the aftermath. For these failings, as an Archdiocese, we seek forgiveness of the victims and of their families, knowing that forgiveness and possibly reconciliation is a very long road taken one step at a time.

In this spirit, I invite the victims, or their families, or indeed others in the community to come forth as they wish to approach the Archdiocese about this. I reiterate my invitation to the victims in particular to let us know what the Archdiocese might do to help, to make amends, to do what is right for you now. It is you who were hurt and it is you who can show the way to healing and possibly reconciliation. And with your help, we will set in place a way that is fair, efficient and timely to respond to what you wish to share with us. If and when you wish to contact the Archdiocese, please call Mr. Jean-Maurice Lemoine, Chairman of the Diocesan Advisory Committee on sexual abuse, at (204) 237-9851.

As Archbishop, I am also personally open to meeting the victims to hear what they wish to say to me and to the Archdiocese. In these various ways, my hope and prayer is firstly that we will try to respond to the real needs of the victims. However, I also wish to take this occasion to assure all here in Somerset and throughout the Archdiocese that we will do all in our power to ensure that no other innocent children and young people are ever abused by anyone within the Archdiocese, be they priests, employees or volunteers.

The Archdiocese of Saint Boniface has had an abuse prevention policy since several years based on the guidelines issued by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1994 called *From Pain to Hope*. This Archdiocesan protocol has recently been revised to assure even greater efforts are undertaken to prevent all such abuses. Police and sexual abuse registry checks are required of those people, priests or lay, working with children and those considered vulnerable or at risk. Safe environment coordinators are required in each parish to ensure that the measures of protection are in place, that those working with children or the vulnerable are trained appropriately and that all are informed of the ways a community may see to preventing sexual abuse.

Today in the Church, as elsewhere in society, when an allegation of abuse involving a minor is received, the priest or lay person involved is immediately removed from ministry. As required by law, we immediately contact Social Services and Child Protection Services if the victim is under the age of 16 years. I intend to ensure that any priest or lay person will not return to ministry if the investigation determines that the abuse occurred.

In all of these efforts, I am guided by a Diocesan Advisory Committee made up of lay people, competent in their various professions to deal with the objective of creating a safe and respectful church environment especially for children in faithfulness to our Lord's command: "*Let the children come to me*" (Matthew 19: 14). As well, as part of our protocol we have set up a Victims' Care Committee to offer assistance as needed and as requested to the victims from the moment they reach out to us. Information about our protocol entitled *Working Together for a Safe and Respectful Church Environment* can be found on our Website: www.archsaintboniface.ca

As I come to a close, some may still be asking: “But why come forward at this time, isn’t it better to simply let sleeping dogs lie and just get on with life?” However, I believe, and we are progressively learning in the Church and in society at large, that we must bring such situations to the fore, even if many years after their occurrence.

Why? First of all, for the sake of the victims and their families so as to seek in compassion and justice what is right for them, what they have a right to in terms of their dignity as a human person, a dignity that was wounded by such serious actions. And secondly, we must learn from the past, from our mistakes and failings as well as from our first tentative efforts, how we are to proceed in the future to ensure as much as possible the protection and respect of the dignity of all children and vulnerable people. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, asks nothing less of his Church and we must together find the ways to be faithful to his call. The Gospel today invites us to be alert, awake and active for the sake of the coming of the Good Shepherd in our world today.

And so, as we begin the Advent season and pray for the coming of Christ, for the coming of the reign of God marked by all that is love and justice, our prayer is indeed: *Come Lord Jesus – show us the way, give us humility and courage, and especially strengthen our hope that together we may seek the light of peace you came to bring, O Prince of Peace.*



+Albert LeGatt, D.D.
Archbishop of Saint Boniface