

# THE BUFFALO NEWS

## **Bishop Scharfenberger: Diocese policies demonstrate a commitment to regaining the community's trust**

Dec 1, 2020

The excruciating accounts of abuse by members of the Catholic clergy have been widely reported and are well known by most any Catholic, regardless of age, geography or demographic. As I have insisted since becoming apostolic administrator of the Diocese of Buffalo, we have no higher priority than to support those who have been irrevocably harmed, and to work with them (if they will allow) to assist in their healing and their need to be recognized for who they are and what they have endured, and to be heard. It is the primary reason we have pursued reorganization under Chapter 11.



Bishop Edward B. Scharfenberger.

Our aim is to enable some sense of closure for the largest number of those who have brought claims under the Child Victims Act, while continuing as much as possible the vital work of outreach and service that people of the Catholic faith and many others accomplish each and every day across Western New York.

# THE BUFFALO NEWS

Any suggestion that the diocese takes a “business as usual” approach in dealing with credible accusations of sexual abuse of minors or sexual harassment of adults, however, is categorically false. The diocese has adopted rigorous policies and protocols in recent years that govern the reporting, independent investigation and evaluation of any accusation of sexual abuse of a minor or sexual harassment of an adult.

The claim that there exist “secret files” stored in some deep recess of the Catholic Center replete with lurid details that church authorities are shielding from law enforcement is ludicrous. In full cooperation with the Erie County district attorney, the diocese has turned over all files that relate to allegations against priests – whether long deceased or removed from ministry, pending a final determination by the Holy See about their future state.

To be clear, if the diocese receives an allegation of abuse against a minor, law enforcement authorities, including the appropriate district attorney, are alerted first, even before the allegation is referred to the diocese’s Independent Review Board and investigated by an independent investigator. The priest is placed on administrative leave, prohibited from exercising his ministry or performing the sacraments publicly as a priest. It should be noted that the same protocol is followed even if the alleged violation occurred in the distant past, and even if the victim is no longer a child at the time of reporting, or if the priest is deceased. The record must be clear.

# THE BUFFALO NEWS

If the abuse or harassment concerns an adult, the same protocol is also followed – civil authorities are notified and the case is referred to the Independent Review Board. An independent investigator (not a diocesan employee) is contracted to conduct a thorough investigation. The results of the investigation are referred to the Independent Review Board for its deliberation and recommendation to the bishop. The recommendation may entail permanent suspension of active ministry or return to active ministry. If the allegation pertains to a minor, the diocese defers to the civil process. Upon a determination by civil authorities as well as the Independent Review Board, the case is referred to the Holy See’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith for definitive action, which may result in the accused priest being permanently stripped of his priestly status.

In no way do we deny that grave mistakes have been made. Admittedly, it has taken far too long for church authorities to grasp the true nature of these horrific acts against children for what they are – crimes that require the full weight of justice. Too often, some bishops characterized them as grave moral failings, severe personality disorders or developmental deficiencies that could be mitigated or even fixed. Preventing scandal was often the overriding concern. We know now that this was an unconscionable failing and a tragic injustice to those harmed.

Catholics of Western New York – and all who reside within the region – can be assured that there is zero tolerance in the Diocese of Buffalo today for any

# THE BUFFALO NEWS

sexual abuse of a child or sexual harassment of an adult by a bishop, priest, deacon, employee or volunteer. We expect to be judged not by what we say, but by what we do. Our actions must be able to withstand the bright light of scrutiny from those within and outside the church. Ultimately, it is God to whom we are most accountable, mindful that his judgment is everlasting.

*Bishop Edward B. Scharfenberger is apostolic administrator of the Diocese of Buffalo.*