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Bishops have learned how deeply abuse victims hurt

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WASHINGTON -- Bishops in the United States have learned that the injury to victims of priestly sexual abuse "is deeper than nonvictims can imagine" said the chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on the Protection of Children and Young People.

U.S. bishops also learned that Catholics have been hurt by the "moral failings of some priests" and have been hurt and angered "even more by bishops who failed to put children first" when reports of abuse surfaced, said Bishop Blase J. Cupich of Rapid City, S.D.

Writing in the May 17 issue of *America* magazine, Cupich outlined 12 of the most important lessons he said bishops have learned from the abuse crisis.

He said the one of first lessons for the bishops has been what the impact of abuse has been on minors. He wrote that the abuse of children is "crushing, precisely because it comes at a stage in their lives when they are vulnerable, tender with enthusiasm, hopeful for the future and eager for friendships based on trust and loyalty."

He said bishops must continue to reach out to victims despite the "justified anger felt by victims toward the church."

The advice offered by laypeople, especially parents, has been indispensable, the bishop wrote. "Our capacity to respond to sexual abuse of young people has been bolstered by the insights shared with us by parents as to how to do so effectively."

Bishops have learned that they need to be "mutually accountable" in efforts to protect children and that their participation in "transparent, independent audits" demonstrates their commitment to child protection, he said.

At the same time, Bishop Cupich continued, bishops also have learned they must resist "the defensiveness that institutions often fall back on in crisis moments."

"Resorting to a conspiratorial interpretation of attacks and adopting a 'circle the wagons' approach only prolongs a problem and does nothing to settle it or heal the victims," he added.

In addition, the U.S. bishops have learned that they "must partner with public authorities by complying with civil laws with respect to reporting allegations of sexual abuse of minors and cooperating with their investigation," Cupich wrote.

"All leaders of the community, whether religious or secular, need to work together to protect children and young people," he said.

Other lessons Cupich outlined include:

- Priests have resiliency "that future generations will recall with admiration." Priests have remained committed to their vocation despite "suffering from the actions of those who have besmirched the priesthood they love."
- Mandatory safe environment programs must be maintained to ensure the safety of young people.
- Abusers suffer self-deception and tend to diminish the seriousness of their behavior and the effects on abuse victims and the church at large.
- The faith of people in the pews is strong and will carry them through the challenges posed by the abuse crisis, and the support they continue to give priests and bishops has been humbling.

In June 2002, in response to a wave of revelations of sexual abuse by church personnel over the previous half-century and backlash over how church authorities handled those cases, the U.S. bishops adopted the "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People."

They also approved norms for dioceses to adhere to the charter's mandates, which include setting up safe environment programs in dioceses and parishes. The charter requires an annual audit on how dioceses and religious orders are complying with its provisions.

The charter was updated in 2005, the norms in 2006; the charter and norms have Vatican approval. The charter also established the Office of Child and Youth Protection and the National Review Board to oversee compliance with the charter.

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