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Archbishop says news of clergy abuse rightly met with 'shame, outrage'

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Archbishop John Nienstedt of St. Paul and Minneapolis, at the invitation of a parish pastor, apologized for the archdiocese's handling of clergy sexual abuse allegations in a homily delivered at two Masses Sunday at the parish church.

"I am here to apologize for the indignation that you justifiably feel. You deserve better," Nienstedt said at Our Lady of Grace Church in Edina.

"The negative news reports about past incidents of clerical sexual abuse in this local church have rightly been met with shame, embarrassment and outrage that such heinous acts could be perpetrated by men who had taken priestly vows as well as bishops who failed to remove them from ministry," Nienstedt said.

"While only one of the crimes against minors has happened in this archdiocese since 2002, that is still one too many."

The Catholic Spirit, archdiocesan newspaper, published Dec. 5 the names of 30 priests for whom credible allegations of abuse had been reported after the archdiocese gained court permission to release the names.

"The majority of those allegations go back to the 1970s and 1980s," Nienstedt said in his homily. "Again, that is not to excuse those actions or diminish the harm done to their victims. But it does indicate that progress is being made in reducing the incidence of such terrible misconduct."

Nienstedt has headed the archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis since 2008; he had previously been its coadjutor archbishop.

"When I arrived here seven years ago, one of the first things I was told was that this whole issue of clerical sex abuse had been taken care of and I didn't have to worry about it," the archbishop told reporters between Masses. "Unfortunately I believed that. ... And so my biggest apology today is to say I overlooked this. I should have investigated it a lot more than I did. When the story started to break at the end of September, I was as surprised as anyone else."

In his homily, Nienstedt said he and his staff had four goals: "to ensure safe environments for everyone in our churches, Catholic schools or religious programs, especially minors and vulnerable adults"; "to reach out to victims so as to promote their process of healing"; "to regain the trust of our Catholic faithful"; and "to reassure our clergy of our deep and abiding gratitude for their tireless and self-giving service, and to assure them of our commitment to them and to their legal and canonical rights."

In November, the archdiocese announced that it had hired the Los Angeles-based firm of Kinsale Management Consulting to review clergy files as part of an archdiocesan plan to take a comprehensive approach to

addressing the issue of clergy sexual misconduct.

In other actions, Nienstedt appointed Fr. Father Reginald Whitt as archdiocesan vicar for ministerial standards. He has full responsibility for all issues related to clergy sexual misconduct. Also in place is a newly formed Safe Environment and Ministerial Standards Task Force.

In his homily, the archbishop reflected on the story of St. Josephine Bakhita, who was kidnapped at age 9 and sold five times in the Sudanese slave market.

"She was emotionally and psychologically abused, flogged every day until she bled. As a result she carried 144 scars on her body throughout her life. Eventually, she was bought by an Italian merchant who brought her to Venice, Italy. Through this Italian owner, she came to know a totally different kind of master, the one she called 'paron,' the living God of Jesus Christ," he said.

"I suggest to you St. Josephine as a patroness, an intercessor for the trials that we have been going through these past 10 weeks here in the archdiocese," Nienstedt said. "Let us pray that the Lord will fill us with an abundance of that great virtue, so that we can, like St. Josephine Bakhita, transform the present situation before us into something salvific, saved by our hope in the Lord Jesus."

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