

August 5, 2010

To: Bishop William Callahan, Bishop designate diocese of La Crosse  
From: Peter Isely, SNAP Midwest Director  
Re: Your first 100 Days as the bishop of La Crosse

We are writing to you as victims and family members of childhood rape, sexual assault, and abuse by clergy to fraternally support and challenge you to use your first 100 days as the new bishop of La Crosse to take three simple and decisive steps to reverse the growing sex abuse and cover up crisis in your new diocese.

So far, in public statements, you have offered prayers to resolve this crisis. Now, we believe, it is time to put a good plan in place to back the good intentions. These three “benchmarks” we believe, are the basis of such a plan and can be initiated, and with hard work and commitment, completed within 100 days:

1. Independent law enforcement and professional review and investigation of all abuse reports;
2. Release Fr. Umberger’s police report and church investigation, including former Bishop ListECKI’s involvement in this case
3. Complete overhaul of diocesan review board personnel policies and procedures.

It is promising that in your press conference announcing your appointment as the new La Crosse bishop you said that the protection of children will be your top priority. Yet you also said that because you are a religious order priest, you did not know as much about the child abuse scandal as a diocesan priest would. What difference does that possibly make? Are you suggesting that children are in less competent hands because you’re a Franciscan bishop? You certainly claimed to know enough about child sexual abuse to provide the lead testimony for all of Wisconsin’s bishops before the Assembly Committee on Children and Families hearing in October, 2009, to try to defeat the Child Victim Act, a bill which would allow the state’s victims of childhood sex crimes to bring civil suits. How can you be the lead expert on the church’s response to child sex abuse last October and this month plead a special level of ignorance about it?

For several years now, according to a nationwide study by leading criminologists at New York’s John Jay College for Criminal Justice, we have been concerned about the clearing of clergy by the La Crosse diocese with sexual abuse reports at a higher percentage rate than anywhere else in the United States. While only 9 percent of all priests reported to have assaulted children in the US have “unsubstantiated” claims, in the La Crosse diocese that figure is 68 percent, an alarming six times the national average.

Prominent law enforcement and religious leaders have echoed our concerns about the La Crosse diocese senior management and the handling of sex abuse reports. Jerry Matysik, the Eau Claire city police chief, the largest city in your diocese, wrote to Wisconsin lawmakers about his conclusion that the diocese seems more interested in protecting itself than protecting children. Fr. James Connell, vice vicar of the Milwaukee Archdiocese, a member of the archdiocese lay review board, and a prominent canon lawyer, has publically detailed serious flaws in the

diocese's standards for reviewing these cases. Among these glaring flaws is that the review board keeps no notes or records of its proceedings. Yet, Archbishop ListECKI could say, in response to Fr. Connell's criticism, that no child is at risk in the diocese of La Crosse because the diocesan leadership and the review board has re-examined past cases. Obviously, with Umberger and Donker-Baine that's now been proven not to be the case. But perhaps that's because no one kept notes?

The recent arrests of Frs. Umberger and Donker-Baine for sex crimes demonstrate in real time that the La Crosse diocese is not a statistical anomaly. Both these priests had been reported to the diocese and were left in ministry, only to be later arrested. No proper investigation was undertaken by the diocese, no professional or criminal evaluations by experts were conducted and, what is truly mystifying, the diocese lay review board for these complaints was not empanelled or consulted. That review board is already seriously flawed since its membership includes the diocesan corporate attorney and several priests from the diocese, hardly a "lay" or "impartial" composition, but at least that board would have examined the evidence, heard witnesses and rendered an opinion.

What the diocese lacks, and seems to refuse to properly create, is what children and Catholics deserve: the equivalent of a true licensing or professional board to review and investigate complaints of misconduct by clergy, render and make public their findings, and enforce disciplinary measures, including, if called for, suspension or revocation of one's "license" to practice the occupation of an ordained minister.

Your first one hundred days as bishop is going to set the tone and tenure of your civic and pastoral legacy. Bishops should be the best of citizens when it comes to honoring an obeying child protection laws and more importantly the spirit of the law. Sadly, this appears to have not been the case in the diocese of La Crosse for many years. It is your burden and your opportunity now to change that.

Peter Isely  
SNAP Midwest Director  
[peterisely@yahoo.com](mailto:peterisely@yahoo.com)  
414.429.7259

John Pilmaier  
SNAP Wisconsin Co-Director  
[pilmaier@execpc.com](mailto:pilmaier@execpc.com)  
414.336.8575