

Remarks of Mary Achilles
News Conference
Friday, May 4, 2012

Thank you, Archbishop Charles. Thank you, Gina.

Honesty, Healing and Hope in Christ: Confronting Sexual Violence in our Archdiocese is an initiative of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia to provide support and assistance to our parishioners as they come to terms with these final decisions. This initiative is about caring for parishioners as they begin to grapple with the real life implications of these decisions.

We have a unique opportunity at this moment which is why I have reengaged with the Archdiocese at this time—because this is an opportunity to come to terms with the broader issue of sexual violence within our community of faith. The most cited statistic in recognizing the prevalence of sexual violence is that one in four girls and one in six boys is sexually assaulted before the age of 18 in this country. This startling statistic should awaken in us an insight into the lives of our parishioners. This is a significant statistic because it identifies for us that potentially one quarter of our parishioners will hear these announcements within the context of their own victimization, their own sexual abuse. Whether that abuse was at the hands of a family member, trusted family friend, or whomever, we cannot ignore how dramatically that will influence how they hear these announcements.

Gina eloquently described for us the thorough and complex investigation required in historical allegations of child sexual abuse. Archbishop Charles outlined significant changes in the process and policy that will increase the integrity of the Archdiocesan investigations moving forward. Fully confronting sexual violence in our Archdiocese requires us to address the impact that these crimes have on the many individuals who are in so many ways connected to the accuser, to the accused, and who in fact may be silent victims of sexual violence in our parishes.

As an Archdiocese we have become painfully aware of the destruction of trust that many have voiced. As someone who has worked in service to victims of crime for upwards of 30 years, I can tell you that the destruction of trust experienced by many Catholics in our pews mirrors the experience of adult survivors of child sexual abuse as adult survivors of sexual abuse feel equally betrayed by the parent who failed to protect them. Catholics have expressed a sense of betrayal and the resulting distrust in the Archdiocese for our past failures to respond appropriately. The pain is ever present. The shame often feels too heavy to bear. However, by embracing this opportunity to fully confront sexual violence in our Archdiocese, we create a place where parishioners can give voice to their varied responses to these decisions, where they can support each other in identifying the harms and develop remedies to their concerns. Honesty, Healing and Hope in Christ: Confronting Sexual Violence in our Archdiocese is a model for parish restoration that is built upon a community crisis response model—a response model which focuses on the emotional trauma related to the extraordinary experiences of people.

Created by a committee comprised of pastors, educators, parishioners and a community based victim assistance program, it includes a plan of dissemination of information on the decisions announced today on the recognizing and understanding of sexual violence and the appropriate response to disclosures of sexual violence. It includes a plan of onsite support through the weekend as our community begins to live with the reality of the situation we find ourselves in. It includes opportunities over the first weekend to engage formally and informally with each other and with outside consultants and outside crisis workers who will provide information and assistance to parishioners just beginning to comprehend their possible immediate and long term reactions. Then we will begin to provide more education and offer opportunities for interaction.

We want to help people understand the complexity of investigating historical allegations of sexual violence and the impact that sexual violence has on victims. We also want to provide information and resources to help parents talk with their children about sexual violence. We are working with The Institute for Forgiveness and Reconciliation of Chestnut Hill College. Sister Cathy is here—a sister of Saint Joseph (from The Institute for Forgiveness and Reconciliation of Chestnut Hill College). The Institute for Forgiveness and Reconciliation of Chestnut Hill College will help us and help parishioners in constructive dialogue that will allow parishioners to come together to identify the harms and give voice to their concerns in an atmosphere where all reactions are respected.

Honesty, Healing and Hope in Christ: Confronting Sexual Violence in our Archdiocese is a commitment to change. It is a beginning—a beginning step in building trust by creating an Archdiocese that is engaged in increasing its understanding of sexual violence to more effectively adhere to its moral imperative—the protection of children.