



Diocese of Plymouth
From the Office of the Bishop

Pastoral Letter for the weekend of 29th/30th September to be read in all the Churches and Chapels of the Diocese of Plymouth

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

We have all been deeply sickened to hear of the most recent catalogue of historic abuse of the young and the vulnerable. Such devastating acts against the innocent are particularly horrifying when they have occurred in a Church context. It is heart-breaking to hear of the failures of clergy in particular - deacons, Religious, priests, bishops and a cardinal.

The words from today's Gospel hit hard; "Anyone who is an obstacle to bring down one of these little ones, who have faith, would be better thrown into the sea with a great millstone round his neck".

I was struck, too, by yesterday's Feast of the Great Archangels - Michael, Raphael and Gabriel, especially St Michael, who is the strong Defender of goodness in the face of great evil. As we hear accounts from victim survivors of this terrible abuse, we know we need to call on the strength of St Michael to bring this evil out into the light. We must allow the truth to be told.

It is important to recognise that the procedures we have adopted these past years, are a vehicle to build trust anew. Decisions regarding these matters are now not overseen by Bishops in the Church in England and Wales, and have not been so, since the Nolan principles of 2001. Every diocese has an Independent Safeguarding Commission, and compulsory reporting of suspected criminal behaviour is mandatory for all of us.

No doubt, we will continue to hear accounts of historic failures. There is still much to do and I want to thank all those who work so hard in our diocese, to ensure our parishes, schools, and communities are safe places for all, especially the most vulnerable.

Yet beyond the protocols, we are all aware of the people who have suffered and who continue to suffer. First among these are the victim-survivors of abuse. To anyone who carries this burden or who has been hurt in any way, I say how sorry I am. Please let us know if there is any more we can do.

I think also of many of you for whom these latest revelations cast a dark shadow over your own faith, and of the vast majority of good deacons, priests and bishops who carry the burden of the failures of their colleagues with a particularly heavy heart.

How can we all continue to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ at this moment? There are two things I would like to suggest.

Firstly, we must do so with great humility and with a very deep awareness of the wrongs that have happened. This wound affects the whole Church. We know some bishops, and others, have failed to respond adequately. St. John of the Cross said, "Where you do not find love, pour love in and you will draw love out." And in what we have come to know, there is a huge lack of love and the abuse of those seeking love.

For this reason, I am asking the deacons and priests to come together in the three counties of the diocese to pray together in services of penitence and healing. If you felt able to join us, I would be very grateful. I will be sending out details of this in due course.

Secondly, in the face of this evil, grave moral failure, the lack of virtuous leadership, cover-ups and other such scandalous behaviour, we must take comfort from the Gospel and renew our own deep following of the Lord. In St John's Gospel, when some of His disciples had stopped following Him, Jesus said to Peter, "And you, too, will you also leave?" With St Peter, do we not also want to reply, "Lord, to whom shall we go? Only you have the message of eternal life."

We ask the Lord to help us remain steadfast. Within the struggle and pain of this time, it is to Him that we turn and seek the renewal, the healing and the purification that only He can give, for the reform of His Church.

Please pray for me.

Yours devotedly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mark O'Toole".

Rt Rev Mark O'Toole
Bishop of Plymouth