



ASSOCIATION OF CATHOLIC COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

One Dupont Circle NW, Suite 650, Washington, DC 20036
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From the member presidents of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, to His Holiness, Francis, Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, and to the Bishops, Ordinaries, Religious Superiors and Provincials of the United States of America:

Today, our Church is suffering. Leaders of the Church have fallen under suspicion of perpetrating or tolerating abuses of both minors and adults. In some regions, new investigations reopen earlier wounds of abuse and betrayal within the Church. The faithful are losing their trust in the Church, as its witness to the Gospel is discredited.

We have the privilege of leading Catholic colleges and universities where the dialogue of faith and reason forms students to seek justice. These institutions of higher education have an essential tie to the Church that includes “close personal and pastoral relationships ... between University and Church authorities, characterized by mutual trust” (St. John Paul II, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, n. 28). While the entire Church is harmed in this crisis, we are particularly concerned when the principles of Catholic education are contradicted by the behavior of some of the very bishops and religious superiors with whom we should cooperate. Our institutions stand as places of faith-filled inquiry and the actions of these individuals have cast doubts on our credibility and our moral authority. This Church crisis is likely to send damaging waves across Catholic higher education for years to come, as a shadow extends over our collective reputation.

We are encouraged that you, Holy Father, will convene the heads of the national bishops’ conferences in February to address this crisis. Beyond that, we ask for two specific courses of action: First, we add our voices to many others who urge you, as the Supreme Legislator in the visible Church, to constitute immediately a lay commission consisting of equal numbers of faithful lay women and men. This committee must be empowered with the independence and authority necessary to investigate episcopal involvement in the sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable adults, and the sexual harassment of adults, including seminarians, novices, postulants, and clerics. This commission should be empowered to impose sanctions, working in cooperation with law enforcement. The commission must also be tasked with offering recommendations regarding the future administration of the Church that would improve the adjudication of cases of abuse by religious, and also regarding the laity’s “‘co-responsibility’ for the Church’s being and acting” (Benedict XVI, Speech at Sixth Ordinary Assembly of the International Forum of Catholic Action, August 10, 2012).

Second, we implore you to address the insufficiencies in canon law that have enabled serial abusers to remain unpunished for decades. Among these inadequacies is the lack of penalties for bishops and religious superiors who protect abusers. New provisions must be enacted to sanction and, when necessary, remove bishops and religious superiors who are found to have sheltered members of the clergy and religious life found to have committed abuse. Canon law must be revised to favor accountability and transparency over clericalism and secrecy.



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We ask this in solidarity with victims and their families, for the sake of justice in the Church, to hold the guilty accountable and clear the innocent from suspicion, and to begin restoring trust between the laity and the bishops. For the sake of truthfulness and reconciliation, this lay commission should simultaneously submit its findings to you, Holy Father, and make them publicly known, along with its recommendations, especially in regard to the reporting and discipline of bishops and religious superiors.

To this end, Holy Father, we commit our own expertise and resources to this task. Whatever we can reasonably contribute to the reform of the Church, we will do. We also commit to prayer for our students, faculty, administration, employees, alumni, and ourselves, so that we may emerge from this crisis with intellects and hearts purified by the fire of the Holy Spirit.

Signed,

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