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(As movie theaters across the country feature the recently released film "Spotlight" which depicts the story of the Boston Globe investigative team that uncovered widespread child abuse by priests in the Archdiocese of Boston, Dr. Francesco Cesario, president of Assumption College and chairman of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops National Review Board on the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults, reflects on the issue of child sexual abuse and the progress the Catholic Church has made in this area.)

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Sexual abuse of minors is a problem that affects many institutions in our society. A study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente's Health Appraisal Clinic in San Diego found that 24.7 percent of women and 16 percent of men experienced sexual abuse during their childhoods. In 2002, the Catholic Church recognized that it was not immune to this issue, and since then, has developed a comprehensive program to respond to the crisis, including efforts to help victims and survivors begin the healing process.

The crisis has cost the Church not only in financial settlements, but more importantly, it has

broken a sacred bond of trust and moral standing among the faithful and others. The sexual abuse of minors, particularly by priests, is a crime as well as a grave sin — a sin that the Church has, and will continue to, address for years to come. While we can correctly state that the Church has responded with comprehensive policies and procedures to keep children safe, perhaps it is also important to reflect upon the idea that the Church can now be a model for other organizations that serve the needs of children and young people.

Thirteen years after the news first broke, Hollywood is offering up its interpretation of the clergy sexual abuse crisis with the upcoming film, “Spotlight,” which focuses on the investigative reporting done by The Boston Globe to expose the Church’s failures that allowed the sexual abuse of children to occur. The film will undoubtedly be a painful reminder of the abuse suffered by victims, whose on-going healing should continue to be supported by the Church.

While the film focuses on events of the past, viewers may think that the film is portraying the present situation in the Church, concluding that nothing has changed in the Church’s response to the sexual abuse of minors. However, it is important to realize that the Church has implemented numerous successful steps in the years since the revelations of abuse. In establishing a Pontifical Commission to oversee the Church’s response to this matter, His Holiness Pope Francis himself has written “everything possible must be done to rid the Church of the scourge of the sexual abuse of minors and to open pathways of reconciliation and healing for those who were abused.”

Begin process of healing

Over the last 13 years, the Church has created safe environments for children and become a place where victims and survivors can begin a process of healing. Popes St. John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and now Francis, as well as the bishops of the United States, have all issued heartfelt apologies to victims and survivors of abuse, acknowledging their suffering. Bishops across the United States — and around the world — have sought forgiveness for the lapses in Church policy and decisions made that led to harm for its most innocent and cherished members, and will continue to apologize to victims and survivors for the abuse they have endured.

The Church has done more than apologize. It has enacted an aggressive program to encourage prevention of such abuse and to provide a comprehensive support system for victims and survivors. Since 2002, the Church has implemented effective policies and procedures to keep

children safe; actions that should be a model for other organizations that serve the needs of children and young people.

Through the efforts of the bishops, the Church has demonstrated a shared commitment to a singular call to action: “Promise to Protect, Pledge to Heal.” This vow is embodied in the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, a resource that directs dioceses on how to respond to allegations of sexual abuse and includes guidelines for “reconciliation, healing, accountability, and prevention of future acts of abuse.” The Charter mandates background checks for clergy and any Church employee or volunteer who have contact with children and ensures that children and adults in parishes or schools participate in “Safe Environment Training.” According to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 98 percent of adults, more than 1.9 million, working in Catholic parishes and schools have been trained in the safe environment program and successfully completed background checks. The USCCB also reports that 93 percent of children, more than 4.4 million, have been taught how to protect themselves from abuse and how to report an incident should it occur.

Bishops remain committed

The Bishops have demonstrated that they remain committed to the Charter and the need to respond effectively to allegations of sexual abuse as well as maintain safe environments. To assist the Bishops in their commitment, the National Review Board – an exclusively lay board established by the Bishops in the Charter – advises Bishops on how to prevent and respond to sexual abuse of minors and assesses their compliance in the implementation of the Charter through the annual audit. They have also established Diocesan Review Boards, comprised of clergy and laity, whose responsibility is to review any allegations of sexual misconduct and advise Bishops on a proper course of action. The Bishops have also implemented a zero tolerance policy with regard to all clergy against whom credible allegations have been made. Those individuals are permanently removed from ministry. All allegations are reported to civil authorities.

The Church has also enacted precautionary measures for those discerning a call to the priesthood. For instance, before individuals are admitted to seminary, they are subject to a comprehensive screening that includes background checks, psychological evaluation, education and other measures throughout their years of formation. Prevention is, however, but one facet of the Church’s response to this matter.

The Church is committed to providing the means for victims and survivors to begin a process of healing, providing more than \$85 million for counseling so that they may begin that healing process. All dioceses have hired Victim Assistance Coordinators who serve as advocates for victims and survivors; individuals who, while they work for the Church, have a primary responsibility to meet the needs of victims and survivors such as providing Church-funded counseling or arranging meetings with bishops so that the victims' stories can be shared with those responsible for fostering safe environments. The Catholic Church will continue to offer counseling services for victims of sexual abuse for as long as they are needed.

Sexual abuse of minors is, as Pope Francis has said, a "scourge" that impacts many aspects of society: camps, scouting organizations, public schools and even families. The Church understands that it must continue to lead in this area, to provide realistic prevention measures and a support system to assist victims and survivors.

Church continues work to restore trust

The Church is also committed to strengthening its safe environments as it continues its work to restore trust with the faithful and others. While substantive progress has been made, the bishops must avoid complacency and continue to look for ways to strengthen the Church's response. The safety of children and the healing of victims and survivors must continue to be a priority for the Church.

While sexual abuse of minors is not just a Catholic problem, we can correctly state that the Church has responded to the issue with comprehensive policies and procedures to keep children safe, reassuring to parents such as myself. It is also important to acknowledge that the seriousness with which the Church responded to this crisis has resulted in the Church emerging as a model for other organizations that serve the needs of children and young people in creating safe environments, demonstrating how institutions and organizations should respond to the societal problem of sexual abuse of minors.