



DIOCESE OF ST. AUGUSTINE

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

THE MOST REVEREND ERIK T. POHLMEIER

The sexual abuse of minors is a grave evil that has caused immeasurable harm. It is with great sorrow that we acknowledge the instances where clergy and other members of the Catholic Church have been guilty of such heinous crimes. Our hearts go out to the victims, and it is our solemn duty to assist them in their process of healing. Equally important is the unwavering commitment to protecting all those who participate in activities within our parishes and schools.

With this in mind, the purpose of this document is to acknowledge past mistakes and ensure that the Diocese of St. Augustine fully complies with the best policies for the care of children and the pursuit of justice in accordance with God's demands.

The Safe Environment Program has been in place in this diocese since 1998 and has evolved and improved continually over the years. As the bishop of the Diocese of St. Augustine, I hereby promulgate and reaffirm, as the official diocesan policy, the elements required by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*. We also adhere to the essential norms derived from the charter's latest revision in 2018, which have received recognition from the Holy See and are considered particular law in all dioceses of the United States. Furthermore, we extend the protections of the charter and norms to vulnerable adults as defined in Florida law, encompassing all dioceses within the Province of Miami.

This policy is also designed to ensure justice by providing clear guidelines on how to respond to perceived risks and initiate investigations when necessary. Striking a balance between taking accusations seriously and protecting the innocence of those falsely accused is indeed challenging, but it is of utmost importance. The individuals entrusted with reporting and investigating take their responsibilities seriously, guided by the Spirit that God provides, in their quest for truth.

The Diocesan Safe Environment Program consists of the following components:

- *LiveScan Background and Screening* – mandatory for all clergy, religious, lay employees, educators and covered volunteers. Diocesan clearance must be obtained before an individual assumes their employment or begins volunteer service. I want to emphasize that there can be no compromises or exceptions concerning this aspect of the Safe Environment Program.
- *The Protecting God's Children 4.0 (PGC) Program* aims to educate clergy, religious, employees, educators and volunteers in establishing and maintaining a safe environment for children and youth. A 30-day compliance window is granted to individuals to complete the PGC program from the date of background screening clearance.
- *The Circle of Grace® Program*, authored by the Archdiocese of Omaha, provides educational tools for children to protect themselves and has been successfully implemented in all diocesan schools and parish religious education programs. Additionally, the VIRTUJS Healthy Relationships for Teens 2.0 Program is designed to help high school youth cooperate in maintaining their personal safety. It is essential that every child and youth in our Catholic schools, parish religious education and youth programs have the opportunity to participate in this critical element of our Safe Environment Program. Here again, there can be no compromise.
- Continuing education through the VIRTUJS online training module titled *A Plan to Protect God's Children 4.0* is required every five years.

By diligently adhering to the components listed above, our diocesan program ensures full compliance with the requirements of the USCCB's Office for the Protection of Children and Young People. I direct that these policies be consistently and thoroughly implemented in each parish, school and agency within our diocese.

May God's guidance and grace be with us as we strive to protect and care for the vulnerable among us, especially our children and young people. Let us learn from past mistakes and uphold justice as we move forward, seeking to serve our communities with love, compassion and integrity.

In Christ,

Most Reverend Erik T. Pohlmeier
Bishop of St. Augustine
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