



## **Statement by Bishop Robert J. Baker Regarding Recent Sex Scandal to the Clergy and Lay Faithful of the Diocese of Birmingham in Alabama**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Little in this world can elicit a greater sense of visceral pain, righteous anger, staggering frustration, or paralyzing despair than the sudden unveiling of decades of serious, gut-wrenching betrayal by those in ordained ministry.

From the moment a man is ordained a deacon, priest, or bishop, he stands in the person of Christ for the Church and the world. While no human is worthy of such a high calling, and without extraordinary holiness no man can fulfill his vocation to perfection, each is anointed for the sacred duty of faithfully celebrating the Sacraments and imitating the mystery they celebrate by modeling their lives on the sacrificial mystery of the cross of Jesus Christ.

Yet again in recent weeks, the Church is thrust deep into the throes of shocking and unanticipated betrayal by the revelations of the sinful, egregious actions of those in positions of power, by those whose lives were meant, through Christ, to be lived sacrificially for others. Whether the acts committed were by hierarchs, priests, or deacons, the evil committed and the evil inflicted is horrific, excruciating, and absolutely intolerable.

While most of the scandalous behaviors recently reported occurred decades ago, even before the Dallas Charter was instituted in 2002, there is in this current spate of dreadful news enormous challenges we must face and publicly address. The Dallas Charter offered much that was helpful in dealing with the issue of the sexual abuse of minors, but it did not deal clearly and decisively with the greatest issues we are facing in this newest round of reports.

I find it no coincidence that these reports arrived on the heels of the 50th anniversary of *Humana Vitae*, Pope Paul VI's encyclical, dated July 25, 1968. We know that *Humana Vitae* addresses the regulation of birth, and the sacredness, dignity, and life-affirming nature of conjugal love shared within the Sacrament of Marriage. The question might arise, "How does that relate to the scandals of the day?" The answer is quite simple and something we don't hear often enough: Virtue. More specifically, and something we hear of even less: Chastity.

Sadly, chastity is not a word that is highly utilized in common parlance, nor is it a concept that is highly valued or understood in our culture. Even more sadly, it is a virtue that obviously has been too frequently lost to the powers of the world, the flesh, and the devil within the ordained ministry of our Church. This is the greatest sadness of all; and when you combine this with narcissism, pride, and abuse of power, you elicit the perfect storm that we see today.

St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) was no stranger to a Church that shared the similar ingredients of lust, narcissism, pride, power, and greed, as he devoted his priestly ministry, often at times of great risk to his life, to bringing some 40,000 Calvinists back to the Catholic faith post-Reformation. In short, Francis ministered to

the souls who departed the faith in part because of the scandalous reign of Pope Alexander VI (Rodrigo Borgia 1431-1503) and the immoral behaviors of ordained clergy across Europe. Pope Alexander VI was known to have fathered numerous children by various concubines, as well as to have had criminal involvement in the Italian underworld. Similarly, it was not uncommon to find priests in open relationships with their mistresses and fathering children on the side. These scandals, along with others, scattered the seeds of contempt that helped lay the foundation for the Protestant Reformation.

At the time, St. Francis de Sales uttered these prophetic words, that are as relevant today as they were during his priestly ministry, “Those who commit these types of scandals are guilty of the spiritual equivalent of murder, but I’m here among you to prevent something far worse for you. While those who give scandal are guilty of the spiritual equivalent of murder, those who take scandal—who allow scandals to destroy their faith—are guilty of spiritual suicide.”

What is the difference between the scandals of the Church of the 16th and 17th centuries and the Church of today? The lust, narcissism, pride, and abuse of power are pretty much the same. The difference we see now lies in the nature of the lust. We are forced today to face the tragic revelation of scores of accusations of predominately homosexual behavior and abuse.

The Pennsylvania grand jury has not euphemized the quasi-pornographic details of the acts committed by the clergy; and these bring us all to tears of repentance and to prayer, which is not a bad place to be in the darkness of grave evil.

As your bishop, I share your pain. Please know, too, that through our Youth Protection Program, background checks, and lay-member Diocesan Review Board, we have been vigilant in our efforts to protect our children.

Please know we are blessed with so many faithful and dedicated priests who share the same outrage and are suffering greatly by these revelations. Some have even been unjustly attacked while wearing their clerical collars in public places. We have all endured more than enough of this evil, and it is time we join forces against it. We are stronger together than we could ever be apart.

Allow me momentarily to return to the quote from St. Francis de Sales:

*“While those who give scandal are guilty of the spiritual equivalent of murder, those who take scandal — who allow scandals to destroy their faith — are guilty of spiritual suicide.”*

This is where we all have our part in the solution. We cannot allow these scandals to destroy our faith. We, as a diocese, cannot be guilty of spiritual suicide any more than I and my brother priests can be guilty of spiritual murder. We all must turn to the Bread of Life for our sustenance. Only by turning to prayer and penance, and by living a life of sacrificial virtue, steeped in the Sacraments of the Church, does any one of us stand a chance against the great evils of our time. Please consider giving at least an hour a week of Eucharistic Adoration, or more, to pray for our Church and its clergy.

On a practical note, you have received a Pastoral Letter from me entitled “Called, Formed, Sent: Missionary Discipleship and its Consequences for Ministry in the Diocese of Birmingham.”

As you know, next year we will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Diocese of Birmingham in Alabama with a Eucharistic Congress.

This Eucharistic Congress, on June 28th and 29th of 2019, will take place at the end of ten months of preparation, based on reflections using this Pastoral Letter as a guide-book for all in our diocese. What we are looking toward is renewal and conversion, a deeper understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus

Christ and a missionary, what it means to be a Christian, what it means to be committed to Jesus Christ, centering our lives totally around him, what it means to fix our eyes only on the Lord Jesus Christ—because taking our eyes off Jesus leads to selfishness, sin, and scandal.

There is so much good in the people I encounter daily in our diocese, and in all its manifold ministries and apostolates. And yet there is so much in need of reform and renewal. All the apostolates and ministries are open to the review and scrutiny of everyone in the diocese, especially in our efforts to protect our children and youth.

With the help of our Pastoral Letter, “Called, Formed, Sent: Missionary Discipleship and its Consequences for Ministry in the Diocese of Birmingham,” released officially on the Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary, August 15th, I invite everyone to review carefully our diocesan efforts for child and youth protection and all our apostolates and ministries through the lens of “missionary discipleship” to determine how and whether all we do as a diocesan Church conforms to the mind and heart of Jesus Christ.

Further, I invite you to invoke with me the intercession of St. Joseph, the Spouse of the Blessed Mother, and Patron of the Universal Church, in this Diocesan “Year of St. Joseph,” for his guidance, protection, and pastoral care in all we do in preparation for the celebration of the 50th anniversary of our diocese on June 28, 2019.

Praying for our hearts and minds to be centered around our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, during this time of reflection and conversion, I am

Respectfully yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Robert J. Baker". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

Most Rev. Robert J. Baker, S.T.D

Bishop of Birmingham in Alabama