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**Pastoral Letter to be read
on the First Sunday of Advent 2018
Sunday, 2nd December 2018**

Dear brothers and sisters,

During the summer months the media was full of horrifying reports of the sexual abuse of children and young people by clergy, in two Benedictine Schools in this country, and in the wider world abuse in many dioceses in America, Australia and other countries round the world. These crimes have caused a terrible wound in the hearts of the victims of that abuse, and in the community of the Church, the community of God's people, the body of Christ on earth. These terrible wounds brought to my mind the picture portrayed towards the end of St. John's Gospel, when Jesus was being taken down from the cross: "When they came to Jesus, they found he was already dead, and so instead of breaking his legs one of the soldiers pierced his side with a lance: and immediately there came out blood and water." The sexual abuse of children and young people in the Church has deeply affected all of us who are members of the Church: the laity, male and female religious congregations, deacons, priests and bishops. It is heart-rending and we must do what we can to support the victims.

At the same time we must put all this in the wider context of the sexual abuse of young people in the community of our Church which has been prominent in society at large. This was well set out in a very recent interview with Fr. Hans Zollner who is President of the Centre for Child Protection at the Gregorian University in Rome, and a member of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors. He was told that the impression is often given through the media that child abuse is rife in the Catholic Church, and was asked, "Is it possible to say that it is more likely to take place in the Church as opposed to the wider society?" Fr. Zollner's response was this: *"We can't say it is more likely and people who say so can't present statistics. There is no other institution, no other Christian denomination or religion, which has been investigated as thoroughly as the Catholic Church. So there is no real comparison to that. And even within professional groups, there isn't any research that would cover, for example, school teachers... psychologists, doctors, police, and sports trainers. We also have to acknowledge that by far the most sexual abuse and of course physical abuse of minors happens in the family context."* But he went on to say rightly, *"This does not excuse the Catholic Church. Every single abuse that takes place is one too many. Every single abuse that is committed by Catholic clergy and other personnel in the Church is a horrendous crime and needs to be prosecuted and punished... full stop!"*

So I just want to give you a brief summary of what the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales have done in recent years to combat such abuse by clergy, and to reach out to the victims of this abuse. In 1999, Archbishop Cormac Murphy-O'Connor asked Lord Michael Nolan, a well-known and highly respected member of the High Court to set up a review by independent experts on child welfare, to draw up a set of procedures for all the Bishops of England and Wales to deal properly and fully with any allegations against a priest that he had abused a child.

The Review took 12 months to complete and was made public in 2000, and was accepted by all the Bishops of England and Wales. The consequence was that since 2001 every Diocese in England and Wales has a Diocesan Safeguarding Commission to deal with any allegations of abuse by priests, permanent Deacons and laity in responsible positions in the parishes. After five years, Baroness Cumberledge was asked to review how the procedures were working and to provide recommendations as to how they might be improved in the light of experience, which she and the members of the review body did very fruitfully. We also have two national bodies to oversee and improve these procedures on an ongoing basis, the Catholic Safeguarding Advisory Service and the National Catholic Safeguarding Commission (both of which can be accessed on the Internet). As regards to Safeguarding in our schools, all our Diocesan Catholic Schools are subject to the Local Authority of the area in which the school is, and which oversees safeguarding in all the schools in that area. And one of the consequences of my experience early on in my return to my home Diocese of Southwark, was to ask all the priests of the Diocese to contribute to a fund which would enable me to pay for psychotherapy for the victims and their families. The clergy responded magnificently and very generously from their own pockets, and I have been able to help some of the victims and their families, which has helped them enormously.

The season of Advent which we begin today, is a season of hope, longing and joyful expectancy, but is also a penitential season. As we look forward to and prepare for the celebration of Christmas, we need to put our trust firmly in the risen Christ who said: "If you want to be a follower of mine, you must take up your cross and follow me." and "Fear not, I am with you always, yes, even to the end of time." So we must put our trust firmly in that promise, that he will always be with us as his family, the community of faith, and despite all the difficulties we are facing, he will also give us the grace and strength to continue to fulfil the mission of the Church to preach and live out the Gospel in season and out of season. Jesus seeks entry to our innermost lives in order that he may share his life with us. He stands at the gate and knocks. So during Advent I ask every parish in the Diocese to arrange, preferably on a Friday each week, to have adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and pray for those who have suffered abuse. All those attending the National Eucharistic Congress in Liverpool, back in September were uplifted by the experience and came away strengthened in hope and trust in the love, mercy and compassion of Christ. In that time of adoration we encountered the risen Christ and asked for his help to heal the wounds of the Church in these difficult times. The great challenge we have today is to have the courage and strength to continue the fundamental mission of the Church to proclaim the Gospel in the face of the awful scandal of the sexual abuse of children and young people, and to pray for all those who have been abused.

With an assurance of my prayers for you all,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter' with a cross symbol to the left.

Archbishop of Southwark

Given at Southwark, 28th November, 2018