

July 1, 2025

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
3211 4th Street NE
Washington, DC 20017

Dear Bishops of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops,

We write you in the name of all members of the Association of US Catholic Priests (AUSCP), a pastoral and collegial voice of some four-hundred priests serving the church in the United States, to express our profound concern about the severely damaged morale of priests across the country. We encourage you to speak to your priests and let them know you will walk with us in prayer and in ministry to the people in the diocese.

The attached document, “Moving Toward Restoring Justice for Priests,” encapsulates the findings from a two-year endeavor of compiling research studies, speaking with canonists, and listening to stories of diocesan, religious, and extern priests. The analysis found too many cases handled by bishops and superiors lacking *due process* in violation of Canon law. These infractions have gravely harmed the reputation of priests, caused deep emotional and psychological harm, and eroded the faithful’s trust in the Church’s commitment to justice. The infringement of priest rights include:

- The imposition of premature penalties before a priest has had the opportunity to defend himself.
- Publishing the names of priests as accused before substantial and verifiable evidence has been gathered and the investigation completed, including the naming of deceased priests who are unable to defend themselves.
- Continued freezing of priests from their ministry for long periods of time even when there is lack of credible evidence.

Without a fair process, accusations may not be properly investigated, and accusers may be deprived of the justice they deserve. It is crucial that the Church address these injustices by ensuring that all accusers and accused priests are granted a fair hearing.

Should the case be judged as non-credible or unsubstantiated, priests named in complaints or allegations, must be afforded the opportunity to clear their names.

Due process is a fundamental legal principle, ensuring that laws are applied fairly and consistently to all individuals. At the beginning of the sexual abuse scandal, faithful and caring parents sought due process from the bishops for their claims. Those complaints of their children who were victims of sexual abuse within the Church were often dismissed or ignored. Their rights to due process were not fully honored.

This is also evident when accusations are made against priests. In many cases, bishops and religious superiors, perhaps to avoid scandal, have acted precipitously, accepting accusations at face value without a full investigation. A knee-jerk response, compounded by delays or other procedural failures, has resulted in priests being wrongly penalized or removed from ministry based on unfounded accusations. Such actions, unaware of consequences, ignore the fundamental principle of *presumption of innocence*.

Canon Law clearly states that no individual can be punished without a thorough investigation and a fair process. Without *due process*, priests may be wrongly stripped of their duties, and their reputations irreparably harmed. The goal must be to ensure that all priests receive the just due process to which they are entitled. Confidence among the laity as well as all clergy, must be established, so that every victim and named priest cleric must receive the due process to which they are entitled in Canon Law.

After careful consideration of these issues, we offer our modest recommendations as a first step toward restoring justice and fairness. Specifically, adherence to Canons 1321, 1341, and 1362 is essential to preserving the integrity of the investigative process and restoring trust among the clergy that they are supported and valued by their bishops and the church. We believe these measures can also help alleviate the isolation, loneliness and frustration experienced by priests entangled in a legal system that too often denies them solidarity basic rights.

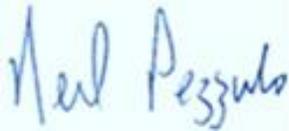
The AUSCP calls on Church leaders to faithfully follow the law. The embracement of due process, presumption of innocence, and the right to a good reputation is foundational to the achievement of justice. The embracement of *due process*, *presumption of innocence*, and the *right to a good reputation* is foundational to the

achievement of justice. Equally true is an investigation completed swiftly and competently, affirming the legal maxim, “*justice delayed is justice denied*”. This is true for both the accuser and the accused.

Bishops, we write you today about our concerns for our brother priests across the United States who have been wounded through no fault of their own. We also respectfully come to you with a spirit open to a continuing conversation of this important matter.

Thank you for your kind attention to our appeal and be assured of our trust in you and your leadership to guide the people of God to move together towards Christ.

Sincerely in Christ,



Fr. Neil Pezzulo, GHM
Chair, AUSCP Leadership Team



Fr. Stephen P. Newton, CSC
AUSCP Executive Director

cc: Archbishop John Wester