

A message from Bishop Patrick in an address to the Parishioners of St Anne's, Buxton during their day of prayer for Victims and Survivors of Abuse (Loudfence) on April 23rd 2024

This evening my prayers and thoughts are with all the victims of the horrific crimes of Fr Paul Cullen, but particularly those victims and survivors from this parish of St Anne's here in Buxton.

As the current Bishop of this Diocese of Nottingham, within which Fr Cullen ministered, I wish to try and apologise to you for his actions, for the way in which his actions were responded to within the diocese, and most importantly for the abuse and hurt each of his victims and their families continue to experience. From meeting with and listening to victims and survivors of child sexual abuse, I have come to understand ever more deeply that child sexual abuse not only heinously violates a child at the time of their abuse, but it all too often cruelly robs a child of their future. The victims and survivors of the abuse perpetrated by Fr Cullen have carried, and continue to carry throughout their lives, the painful and debilitating consequences of his grave crimes of sexual abuse. I want to say very clearly, as part of the apology I offer this evening on behalf of the diocese, that I do not underestimate the traumatic and life-long consequences of his violation of those young people that he abused, and the effect also upon their families and parish communities. The ripple effects of sexual abuse reach out to and affect many others.

This is why I also want to apologise, as Bishop and on behalf of the diocese, for the hurt Fr Cullen has caused each of you, the people of this parish. I can well understand your very real feeling, as his parishioners, of having been betrayed by him as your parish priest. I can also understand your righteous anger and your sorrow at the way he despicably abused and damaged the young lives of some parishioners here. Although what Fr Cullen did to his young victims is now some 40 years ago, I am very aware that the widespread realisation of just what he did here in the parish came out publicly only 10 years ago when he was convicted, and then again just a few years ago when he died in prison. So I am sensitive to the fact that the reality of violation, woundedness and shame is still very fresh here in the parish.

Like you, I continue to love Christ's Church. But I humbly acknowledge that sexual abuse has stained the face of the Church and it has undermined her mission. I have felt for many years a deep sense of shame as a Catholic because of this stain, and even more so as a priest and now as a Bishop. Ever since I met with a small group of victims and survivors of sexual abuse, I have tried to make a small weekly act of reparation and repentance for this stain on the face of the Church. Each year, during the national Catholic Day of Prayer for Victims and Survivors of Sexual Abuse, as part of the service at the Cathedral, I take the opportunity to prostrate myself on the ground before the altar. This act of prostration is, for me, a small gesture of sorrow and repentance before God for the lasting damage that sexual abuse by clergy within the church has caused their victims, and their families and wider parish communities. So I will readily and wholeheartedly prostrate myself again this evening to express to you also the deep sense of shame I feel as a priest and bishop for what some of my clerical brothers have done and for the lack, at times, of an appropriate response on the part of Catholic leadership. The act of prostration represents also my own prayer for the healing of everyone abused and affected by sexual abuse within the Catholic Church, and also my desire to learn from the past, and to pro-actively do all that I can as Bishop to try and ensure that everyone feels safe, and that we all work together to ensure that everyone is safe, in the churches and chaplaincies of our diocese. We can't just leave it to our parish Safeguarding representatives.

As Pope Francis has said, *“the most effective resolution that we can offer to the survivors and victims, to the people of Holy Mother Church, and to the entire world, is the commitment to personal and collective conversion to the humility of learning from, listening to, and assisting and protecting the most vulnerable.”* I’m very grateful that I will be joined in this act of prostration this evening by Fr Gerry and Fr Dominic.

I do want to assure you that the Diocese of Nottingham is very much committed to embedding robust safeguarding practices across all of our parishes, chaplaincies and any organisations operating within the diocese. The professional support of our Safeguarding department now enables the safer recruitment and training of all clergy, employees and volunteers. It also ensures that we are always transparent and accountable in the way that all allegations and concerns are managed.

We are committed to protecting the most vulnerable in our communities, but I readily acknowledge that there is still always much for us all to learn and improve on. Finally, let me make clear that my door, and that of our diocesan Safeguarding Team, is always open to anyone affected by abuse. I will be available after this Service if anyone would like to speak with me.

This is a most important initiative that has been taking place here today. Thank you for inviting me to join you for this evening Prayer Service. I thank very much those who have organised this Day of Prayer, and I pray that it brings some healing to you, as a parish community and as individuals.