

Open Letter to Catholics from USCCB President and Local Bishops

May 1, 2002

“Even though I walk in the dark valley I fear no evil; for you are at my side with your rod and your staff that give me courage.” — Psalm 23, Responsorial Psalm for the fourth Sunday of Easter

Dear Brother and Sister Catholics,

During the Easter season, our liturgy recalls the image of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. In St. John’s Gospel, the Lord tells us that the sheep follow the shepherd “because they recognize his voice. But they will not follow a stranger; they will run away from him because they do not recognize the voice of strangers.” What powerful words for the present moment in the life of our Church!

There is no more meaningful image in Holy Scripture for a bishop than the Good Shepherd. This is the ideal that the Lord wants us to keep before ourselves in our service to the Church. But over the last several months, both because of the sexual abuse of children and young people by priests and how this wounding and terrible crime was sometimes dealt with, we are asking ourselves, “Has our voice become the voice of strangers? Do people now no longer recognize our voice?”

If we are in danger of this, it is something that, with God’s grace, we cannot and will not let happen.

We, your bishops, believed that we had made considerable progress in dealing with sexual abuse of minors and in creating safe environments for children. As the details of troubling cases from the past emerged, that sense of progress has been all but wiped out. We stand ready to take the steps needed to strengthen our past resolve and to keep children and young people safe for the future and to help heal those so tragically hurt by this abuse.

Your bishops have been in intensive discussion about how to provide to the fullest extent humanly possible for the protection of children and youth. And, as you know, the Holy Father has taken a very personal interest in the work we are doing and has offered us whatever assistance we need in addressing this issue. Recommendations to achieve the goal of the protection of our children will be the main agenda item at the Bishops’ General Meeting in Dallas, June 13-15. As we offer prayers for each of you, please pray for us, your bishops, during the coming weeks that our decisions on behalf of children and youth will be wise and effective, and for the well-being of the whole Church.

May God bless each of you and your families and loved ones.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Rev. Wilton D. Gregory
Bishop of Belleville
President, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops

Most Rev. Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.
Archbishop of Denver

Most Rev. José Gomez, S.T.D.
Auxiliary Bishop of Denver