



DIOCESE OF WHEELING-CHARLESTON

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November 26, 2019

My Dear Friends in Christ -

In just a few days from now, we will begin our celebration of the Season of Advent - a time of renewed hope and anticipation, a season that culminates in the assurance of a new beginning. It is in this spirit of the Holy Season now upon us that that I wish to address lingering matters concerning the former bishop, Michael Bransfield.

Since becoming the 9th Bishop of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, I have spent my days traversing this great state to get to know the people whom I am committed to serving and whom the Holy Father has asked me to lead as their pastor and shepherd. I have listened intently to your concerns, to your anger over the deeply troubling behavior and actions of the former bishop that have been widely reported - and to determine how we can begin to move forward in a spirit of unity, support for one another and renewed faith and confidence. I have met with our priests, and also with victims of the former bishop's acts of sexual harassment. As well, I have consulted extensively with the members of our Diocesan Finance Council and our Priest Consultors, and also with legal counsel and other professionals of varying expertise; I have prayed often asking God's guidance.

I am grateful for the patience of the good people of this Diocese, despite their justified eagerness for some sense of justice and closure to this very tragic chapter of this local Church.

Soon after my installation as bishop, I authorized an extensive review of past expenditures by the former bishop in more detail than what was conducted in the preliminary investigation, as reported to the Holy See. The results of these efforts have recently been completed. As you will remember, the Holy Father determined that the allegations against former Bishop Michael

Bransfield were found to be credible and substantiated - both his actions that caused harm to his victims of sexual harassment, and his inappropriate expenditure of Diocesan funds to support a luxurious lifestyle. Consequently, the Holy Father determined that Bishop Bransfield may not again preside or participate publicly in liturgical celebrations as a priest or bishop. In addition, he may not again reside in the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston.

The final obligation required of the Holy Father is that Bishop Bransfield “make personal amends for some of the harm he caused” with the instruction that “the nature and extent of the amends” are to “be decided in consultation” with me as the new bishop. I offered the former bishop the opportunity to come up with a plan of his own for making amends and he has consistently declined to do so. Consequently, I have presented this plan to him.

As a result of my intense discussions with the people of the Diocese, as well as priests and Diocesan employees, there is a deep and abiding sense of betrayal resulting from the former bishop’s actions. It is my honest view that what I have presented to the former bishop as appropriate “amends” reflects not only the spirit of what the Holy Father intended, but will resonate as meaningful restitution among the people of the Diocese. At the same time, I believe that it is also important that these requirements reflect the Church that we are and the values of our Christian faith which include mercy, in addition to justice.

I wish to share with the people of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston the plan of amends that I have asked Bishop Bransfield to carry out in fulfillment of the Holy Father’s directive. It is my fervent hope and prayer that he will accept these measures to bring closure and advance true healing among the people he was entrusted to lead for 13 years:

1. Apologies to the people the former bishop sexually harassed and for the severe emotional and spiritual harm his actions caused them.
2. An apology for the grievous harm he caused to the faithful of the Diocese and the reputation of the Catholic Church here in West Virginia.
3. An apology to Diocesan employees who suffered from a culture of intimidation and retribution which the former bishop created.

4. Rather than receiving a monthly stipend based on the standards recommended by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' "Guidelines for the Provision of Sustenance to Bishops Emeriti," Bishop Bransfield will receive only a monthly stipend equal to what a retired priest would receive as a pension benefit with 13 years of service within the Diocese. That amount is \$736 per month.
5. Although the Diocese will continue to provide for his medicare supplemental health care coverage consistent with what would be provided for a retired priest of the Diocese, Bishop Bransfield will now be liable for his own pharmacy benefit plan. He will now also be personally responsible for his long-term health care policy and a disability policy.
6. We have required Bishop Bransfield to either return or purchase the car he was provided upon his retirement at today's fair market value.
7. Bishop Bransfield will not be afforded the privilege of being buried within the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston upon his death as is the custom for former bishops.
8. As part of our thorough review of financial accounts and records during Bishop Bransfield's tenure, our finance team determined that \$441,492.00 in Diocesan funds was allocated for the bishop's personal expenses, and apparently unrelated to his official responsibilities during the years of 2013-2018 which were not previously reported as taxable income to him. This amount reflects personal travel, vacations, clothing, alcohol and luxury goods. As such, this amount was an excess benefit to the former bishop subject to taxation. It was only as a result of our in-depth internal financial review that this amount was identified as related primarily to the former bishop's personal expenses. The review involved a detailed analysis of his schedule for this period and a determination that no discernable official Church business was associated with these expenditures. To ensure adherence to Federal tax laws, the Diocese has self-reported for Federal tax purposes, and it is now the requirement that Bishop Bransfield reimburse this amount to the Diocese, along with any penalties incurred by the Diocese for not reporting these amounts at the time. In addition, Bishop Bransfield will be required to pay an excise tax in the approximate amount of \$110,000.00 directly to the IRS. The consequences for non-compliance are severe and will be entirely the responsibility of Bishop Bransfield and not the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston.

9. In reviewing the earlier period of the former bishop's tenure, beginning in 2005, we have determined that an additional amount of \$351,146.00 was attributable to the former bishop's luxurious lifestyle. We have likewise requested Bishop Bransfield to reimburse the Diocese for this \$351,146.00 as a matter of moral restitution.

We believe that this total amount of \$792,638.00 constitutes a fair and just amends to the Diocese for what were clearly and solely personal expenses. This amount does not include the \$110,000.00 penalty which Bishop Bransfield owes to the IRS directly, and which relates to the \$441,492.00 that the Diocese has self-reported for the period 2013-2018. This amount does not include personal expenditures previously reported as compensation income to him during the period.

I wish to make clear that it is not my intention to impoverish the former bishop. While not a dollar-for-dollar restitution for the former bishop's excessive expenditure of Diocesan funds, I believe that this amount reflects the spirit of Pope Francis' requirement that Bishop Bransfield make "amends for some of the harm he caused."

We regard the former bishop's acceptance of this plan of amends as an act of restorative justice. It is also for his own spiritual good and his own healing as a man who professes to follow Christ. All proceeds from Bishop Bransfield's repayment will be directed to a special fund to provide for the counselling, care and support of those who have suffered sexual abuse.

In addition to communicating to Bishop Bransfield these measures that we are requiring of him, as well as to his legal counsel, we have also submitted them to the Holy See's representative to the United States, Papal Nuncio Christophe Pierre.

It will now be the decision of Bishop Bransfield whether to accept these measures of restitution and accept responsibility for his actions which have caused grave harm to this Diocese he once led. I have strongly encouraged the bishop to do so and to put the well-being of this Diocese ahead of his own personal considerations. It is my fervent prayer that together as a community of faith - guided by the sustaining Grace of God our Father, Son and Holy Spirit - we can begin

to move forward as we continue to accomplish the vital work of faith that is our obligation as Christians and as Catholics here in this great State of West Virginia.

Sincerely in Christ,

† Mark E. Brennan

Most Reverend Mark E. Brennan

Bishop of Wheeling-Charleston