

**Statement Regarding Judge Bobby DeLaughter's
Order Granting Summary Judgment in Favor of
The Catholic Diocese of Jackson and Other Church Defendants**

On September 29, 2003, the Hinds County Circuit Court granted a motion dismissing the lawsuit filed by Mark and Donna Belenchia and an unspecified "John Doe" Plaintiff against the Catholic Diocese of Jackson and other Defendants. Judge Bobby DeLaughter issued a Memorandum Opinion dismissing the Doe's and Belenchia's claims holding that beyond a "reasonable doubt" the Plaintiffs did not and could not establish a viable claim against the Diocese of Jackson. On October 1, 2003, Judge DeLaughter issued a Final Judgment dismissing the lawsuit and the claims of the Belenchias and Doe with prejudice.

On July 17, 2002, the Belenchias and Doe filed their alleging physical and sexual abuse by priests working in the Diocese of Jackson. The alleged acts occurred over thirty years ago in the late 1960's and early 1970's. In 1999, when Mr. Belenchia confronted the Diocese of Jackson about his alleged abuse, the diocese reached out with pastoral care. In addition, Mr. Belenchia received psychological treatment and submitted bills for medicine, evaluation and treatment which were paid by the Diocese of Jackson. On January 5, 2000, Mr. and Mrs. Belenchia signed a valid enforceable contract with the Diocese of Jackson. The document was entitled "Settlement Agreement and Release of all Claims." The release was reviewed, approved and signed by their counsel. Pursuant to the terms of the release, Mr. Belenchia and his wife were awarded over \$44,000 in damages. In their lawsuit, despite the signed release and their agreement to settle all claims against the diocese, they sought millions of dollars in damages from a Hinds County Circuit court jury.

In his complaint, John Doe admits that like the Belenchias, he signed a settlement agreement and release, but despite receiving monetary damages under the terms of the release, he is entitled to be awarded millions of dollars from a Hinds County jury. The release was approved and signed by Mr. Doe's attorney. In fact, during the time period when the release was signed, the Diocese of Jackson insisted victims seek advice and approval from a lawyer, before signing a settlement agreement and release.

All complaints of sexual or physical abuse have been investigated pursuant to the policies of the Diocese. Since January 1, 1994, the Diocese has had its current policy in place that requires investigating current and past allegations of sexual misconduct by priests and religious. Sexual misconduct by church personnel violates human dignity and the mission of the Church. The Diocese of Jackson is committed to ensuring that children being served by the Church are not at risk of sexual abuse by Church personnel. The spiritual well-being of all victims, their families, and others in the community is of particular concern to the Church. In accordance with diocesan policy, all victims of abuse are offered counseling and pastoral care.

The Diocese of Jackson is in the process of adopting and publishing a diocesan-wide policy entitled "Protection of Children." A copy of this policy will be available on its website. The Protection of Children policy updates and revises the 1994 policy and is consistent with the Norms and Charter passed by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.