

STATEMENT REGARDING SNAP'S JULY 28, 2004 PRESS CONFERENCE

SNAP is a national organization funded in part by plaintiffs' trial lawyers representing the victims of abuse by priests. Members of the local SNAP chapter have sued the Diocese of Jackson, its Bishop and local parishes seeking millions of dollars in damages. The two leaders of SNAP in Mississippi are plaintiffs in these lawsuits. The SNAP lawsuits threaten diocesan services that are provided to needy people throughout Mississippi.

The most recent allegations of abuse contained in the lawsuits filed by SNAP members allegedly occurred in the early 1980s, and one lawsuit alleges misconduct dating back to the early 1960s. In their lawsuits, the plaintiffs demand that the Diocese surrender some, if not all, of its defenses. Among other things, the plaintiffs have demanded the disclosure of the names of wrongfully accused priests, of victims who have requested anonymity, and of information protected from disclosure **by the seal of confession** and the priest/penitent privilege. The Diocese has defended this inquisition by availing itself of all available constitutional and statutory defenses. An appeal in the Morrison case has been granted by the Mississippi Supreme Court. The legal defenses at issue in the Morrison case will be decided by the Court and not by the members of SNAP. The appeal will be decided on the facts, the law, and the briefing of all parties. The Diocese anticipates that a number of religious institutions will file "amicus" or friend of the court briefs supporting the Diocese's constitutional and religious defenses.

SNAP and its members have a history of twisting facts in a light most favorable to their "quest for truth." Most recently, SNAP has sent unsolicited mailings containing false and misleading statements to parents of school children at St. Joseph High School and St. Richard Elementary School. In addition, they ran an advertisement stating that 22 priests were accused of abusing children. However, that statement failed to mention that the list includes priests wrongfully accused. More importantly, the advertisement neglected to inform the public that the list includes events over a 60 year period and that all of these priests and religious brothers are either deceased, left the priesthood, or are no longer in active ministry within the Catholic Diocese of Jackson. Currently, no priests or religious brothers with credible accusations of abuse are in active ministry within the Diocese.

The Diocese has had policies in place concerning reporting and handling of abuse cases since the mid 1980s. Most recently, it modified the policies to meet the guidelines suggested by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. An audit by this group confirmed that the Diocese was following the guidelines and commended the diocese for its work in this area:

"COMMENDATION 1 – For the appearance of Bishop Latino on a statewide televised panel discussion, which included the state coordinator of a major advocacy group, regarding the issue of sexual abuse of minors."

"COMMENDATION 2 – For an excellent sexual abuse prevention policy, which has been in existence in the Diocese since 1986 and has been continually updated and improved."

"COMMENDATION 3 – For the establishment of a review board in 1994 and the excellence of the composition and activities of the board."

"COMMENDATION 4 – For the excellence of the Diocese's cooperation with civil authorities in dealing with matters of sexual abuse of minors."

Over the past twenty years, the Diocese has developed and implemented a safe environment program. The Diocese has publicized standards of conduct for priests and deacons, as well as diocesan employees, volunteers, and any other church personnel in positions of trust who have regular contact with children and young people. The Diocese is conducting background evaluations for all diocesan and parish personnel who have regular contact with minors. The Diocese has not transferred any priest or deacon who has had a credible allegation of sexual abuse lodged against him to another diocese for ministerial assignment or for purposes of residence. The bishop, or his delegate, and the major superiors of religious orders have coordinated their respective roles regarding issues of allegations of sexual abuse made against a cleric member. The Diocese has established screening and evaluative techniques in the selection of candidates for ordination and ongoing formation programs for priests.

In accordance with diocesan policy, all victims of abuse are offered counseling and pastoral care. The Diocese is dedicated to protecting children and promoting healing for those who have been hurt by the clergy misconduct.