



Pastoral letter of Bishop Peter Kohlgraf of Mainz,  
Lenten season 2023

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent, 12<sup>th</sup> March 2023

**“I confess that I have sinned in what I have done,  
and in what I have failed to do.”**

Sisters and Brothers in the diocese of Mainz,

“I confess to almighty God, and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned in what I have done, and in what I have failed to do.”

This confession is at the beginning of the celebration of Mass. Guilty are not only those who do evil, but also those who omit good.

In the past few days, I have read the study on sexual abuse in the diocese of Mainz, entitled „Erfahren.Verstehen.Vorsorgen“ (EVV, translated as discover – understand – prevent), which was presented on March 3 by attorney Ulrich Weber and Johannes Baumeister. The authors have independently investigated and described the situation in the Diocese of Mainz since 1945. We read of hundreds of people affected, and we must assume a large black hole that will remain despite this study. I am convinced that here is still a great deal of silence, those affected are often unable to reveal themselves or have lost all confidence that their lives matter to the church.

In conversations, those affected have told me that they can no longer hear apologies; even the expressions of regret and dismay by those responsible for the diocese cause more outrage than anticipation. I see this study as a step in a process of coming to terms. We will not stop inviting people to tell their life stories because we are not talking about numbers and statistics, we are talking about people.

And hopefully we will talk more and more *with* people in order to learn from them. So, I am grateful for the courage of the many who participated in the study and shared their experiences. I will say again that the opportunity to share experiences and information is still available to anyone who wants to take it.

We also learn from the study of many accused and perpetrators, of their behaviors, of abusive relationship structures and of justification mechanisms, often connected with an exaggerated priestly image or inflated ego. Particularly through the perception of the office, priests became virtually unassailable.

Concrete descriptions of assaults, violence and abuse make me and certainly many others angry, sad and speechless. What happened and is described in the study is truly evil, in a profound, even theological sense. The ecclesiastical system has made this evil possible and fostered it to a frightening degree, in that people have failed to do good. This is a failure at different levels.

Public interest is naturally focused on the bishops since 1945. Bishops Albert Stohr, Hermann Volk, and Karl Lehmann have been accused of failure. As Bishop of Mainz today, I accept this without arrogance. I do not know how I would have acted. Today, other insights and guidelines are available to me and to us. Nevertheless, those responsible should have acted according to guidelines even before 2017, at the latest since 2002, and often this did not happen. Hardly anyone has asked how those affected are feeling and for too long, those responsible have only wanted to protect the reputation of the church by demanding silence or a cover-up.

The accusations against the esteemed Cardinal Karl Lehmann have, especially, shaken many. In a television report on 4th March 2023 (SWR), people on the street were asked about him. Some expressed their grief as for them he had been a “figure of light” with a high moral standing. They are now in the situation of having to reconsider and reevaluate. This also makes them question their faith and their relationship with the church, of which they now see sides that they could not see before. This is also the case for me, since Cardinal Lehmann ordained me as Bishop of Mainz. As Bishop of Mainz, I stand in the tradition of a great diocese and great names among my predecessors. However, the dark sides are also part of it. One man asked the valid question on this TV program; is it permissible to judge a deceased person in this way? By just looking at this particular topic, one certainly does not do justice to the entire life’s work of Bishops Lehmann, Volk and Stohr but it is part of it, and we must not evade it. I repeat from my statement of 3rd March that for the sake of the truth of those affected, there must be no more untouchable monuments.

When we face the past, we do so in order to learn for the future; however, there are other voices that say that the way the aforementioned bishops acted was simply the way it was in the past. To this I want to respond that when we talk about the abuse issue, we are not talking about the past alone, but about people's lives today. In the study, I find two counterarguments against this platitude that this is just how the times were.

On the one hand, there were certainly parish councils that were resistant to the accused and perpetrators and to the diocesan leadership. On the other hand, the Association of German Catholic Youth „Bund der Deutschen Katholischen Jugend“ (BDKJ) in the diocese of Mainz raised its critical voice very early. Both were not heard by those in charge, including the bishops. And still other voices think that after so many years we should now let it go. I cannot accept that. The more serious and brutal the abuse, the more time passes before it is reported, says attorney Weber, and this statement shows that these crimes cannot and must not be written off.

I read in the study about the failure not only of the bishops, but of a whole system. Priests, sometimes other authority figures, have been exalted and elevated to a pedestal, often by themselves. Parishes have played along with the game of supporting perpetrators and the accused and not believing those affected or even putting them under pressure. This is not a phenomenon of the distant past. Families did not want to see, and an environment was created which helped to cover up. Those affected were neither listened to nor believed. State authorities did not always behave in a laudable manner until, at least, the 1990s. The diocese representative was present during police questioning and youth welfare offices did not believe children and adolescents. I do not like to imagine the loneliness suffered by the young people concerned. Society, politics, and theology provided the breeding ground for church action. In this respect, it is too easy to only knock the great monuments off their pedestals. One woman expressed her impression of the diocese of Mainz as follows: “We talk about *sharing* in the context of the pastoral process of our diocese. Maybe we are now entering a phase of sharing suffering.” I think this is a groundbreaking thought.

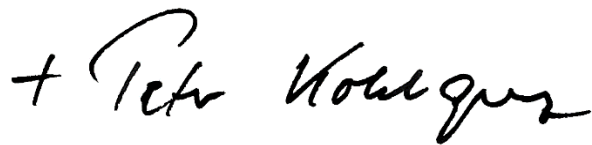
At the same time, we must beware of general suspicion and an atmosphere of mistrust. The majority of priests, pastoral workers and Caritas employees are doing an outstanding job. I want to thank them for continuing to work together. This also applies to the many volunteers in the parishes and church locations.

The study highlights basic attitudes which are important for the future. Children, young people and those under our protection must be able to find safe places and support among us. This can only succeed if we build and nurture a culture of attentiveness that

is not about the powerful, but about the vulnerable who need protection and attention. They should find spaces and people who believe and listen to them. This can succeed if we take the Gospel seriously. Our prevention is on the right track and will also have to be reviewed again against the background of the study. In the case of an intervention, i.e., when we take concrete action as a result of a reported case of abuse, we proceed according to clear guidelines that apply in all German dioceses. For some, this may still not be comprehensible today.

Reading the study made me realize once again how urgent the issues are that we also face on the Synodal Way: the question of power; the image of the priest; sexual morality; as well as breaking up an all-male domain in the church. If there was a systemic failure and there is still a great danger of it today, then we will not be able to avoid dealing with systemic issues.

For the weeks of the Easter Penitential Season, I wish you all God's blessing. Let us share our faith and life, which includes the dark sides that are now revealed. With the confession of guilt of the Mass, we pray for the strength to avoid evil and to be able to do good. So, bless you all the Almighty God, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Peter Kohlgraf". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'P'.

+ Peter Kohlgraf  
Bishop of Mainz

Translation: E und M Baillie

## Questions and concerns

For those who wish to contact the diocese with questions, please note the following possibilities:

**Telephone hotline:** From 3<sup>rd</sup> March, the diocese has been running a telephone hotline, staffed with pastoral care workers and coaches. The telephone number is: 06131 253-522. This hotline will remain active for 14 days, in the week of 11<sup>th</sup> -17<sup>th</sup> March it is staffed from 10-6pm.

**Dialogue events:** Bishop Peter Kohlgraf and Ordinariate Director Stephanie Rieth will chair dialogue events in the four regions of the diocese. Dates and locations as follows: 13<sup>th</sup> March in Offenbach, 16<sup>th</sup> March in Mainz, 24<sup>th</sup> March in Gießen, 27<sup>th</sup> March in Bürstadt (starting at 7:30pm). In addition, a digital dialogue event will be offered on 23 March (also starting at 7:30pm). Please register at [www.bistummainz.de](http://www.bistummainz.de)

**Coordination Office for Intervention and Review:** Questions and concerns might also be addressed to the Coordination Office for Intervention and Review at [ew-studie@bistum-mainz.de](mailto:ew-studie@bistum-mainz.de)

In succession to the telephone hotline, you can reach us at 06131 253-286.