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Letter of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI regarding the report on abuse in the Archdiocese of Munich-Freising

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Vatican City, 6 February 2022

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

Following the presentation of the report on abuse in the Archdiocese of Munich-Freising on 20 January last, I feel the need to address a personal word to all of you. Even though I served as Archbishop of Munich and Freising for a little less than five years, I continue to feel very much a part of the Archdiocese of Munich and to consider it home.

I would like first to offer a word of heartfelt thanks. In these days marked by examination of conscience and reflection, I was able to experience greater friendship and support, and signs of trust, than I could ever have imagined. I would like to thank in particular the small group of friends who selflessly compiled on my behalf my 82-page testimony for the Munich law firm, which I would have been unable to write by myself. In addition to responding to the questions posed by the law firm, this also demanded reading and analyzing almost 8,000 pages of documents in digital format. These assistants then helped me to study and analyze the almost 2,000 pages of expert opinions. The results will be published subsequently as an appendix to my letter.

Amid the massive work of those days – the development of my position – an oversight occurred regarding my participation in the chancery meeting of 15 January 1980. This error, which regrettably was verified, was not intentionally willed and I hope may be excused. I then arranged for Archbishop Gänswein to make it known in the press statement of 24 January last. In no way does it detract from the care and diligence that, for those friends, were and continue to be an evident and absolute imperative. To me it proved deeply hurtful that this oversight was used to cast doubt on my truthfulness, and even to label me a liar. At the same time, I have been greatly moved by the varied expressions of trust, the heartfelt testimonies and the moving letters of

encouragement sent to me by so many persons. I am particularly grateful for the confidence, support and prayer that Pope Francis personally expressed to me. Lastly, I would thank the little family in the Mater Ecclesiae Monastery, whose communion of life in times of joy and sorrow has given me the interior serenity that supports me.

Now, to these words of thanks, there must necessarily also follow a confession. I am increasingly struck by the fact that day after day the Church begins the celebration of Holy Mass – in which the Lord gives us his word and his very self – with the confession of our sins and a petition for forgiveness. We publicly implore the living God to forgive [the sins we have committed through] our fault, through our most grievous fault. It is clear to me that the words “most grievous” do not apply each day and to every person in the same way. Yet every day they do cause me to question if today too I should speak of a most grievous fault. And they tell me with consolation that however great my fault may be today, the Lord forgives me, if I sincerely allow myself to be examined by him, and am really prepared to change.

In all my meetings, especially during my many Apostolic Journeys, with victims of sexual abuse by priests, I have seen at first hand the effects of a most grievous fault. And I have come to understand that we ourselves are drawn into this grievous fault whenever we neglect it or fail to confront it with the necessary decisiveness and responsibility, as too often happened and continues to happen. As in those meetings, once again I can only express to all the victims of sexual abuse my profound shame, my deep sorrow and my heartfelt request for forgiveness. I have had great responsibilities in the Catholic Church. All the greater is my pain for the abuses and the errors that occurred in those different places during the time of my mandate. Each individual case of sexual abuse is appalling and irreparable. The victims of sexual abuse have my deepest sympathy and I feel great sorrow for each individual case.

I have come increasingly to appreciate the repugnance and fear that Christ felt on the Mount of Olives when he saw all the dreadful things that he would have to endure inwardly. Sadly, the fact that in those moments the disciples were asleep represents a situation that, today too, continues to take place, and for which I too feel called to answer. And so, I can only pray to the Lord and ask all the angels and saints, and you, dear brothers and sisters, to pray for me to the Lord our God.

Quite soon, I shall find myself before the final judge of my life. Even though, as I look back on my long life, I can have great reason for fear and trembling, I am nonetheless of good cheer, for I trust firmly that the Lord is not only the just judge, but also the friend and brother who himself has already suffered for my shortcomings, and is thus also my advocate, my “Paraclete”. In light of the hour of judgement, the grace of being a Christian becomes all the more clear to me. It grants me knowledge, and indeed friendship, with the judge of my life, and thus allows me to pass confidently through the dark door of death. In this regard, I am constantly reminded of what John tells us at the beginning of the Apocalypse: he sees the Son of Man in all his grandeur and falls at his feet as though dead. Yet He, placing his right hand on him, says to him: “Do not be afraid! It is I…” (cf. *Rev* 1:12-17).

Dear friends, with these sentiments I bless you all.

Benedict XVI